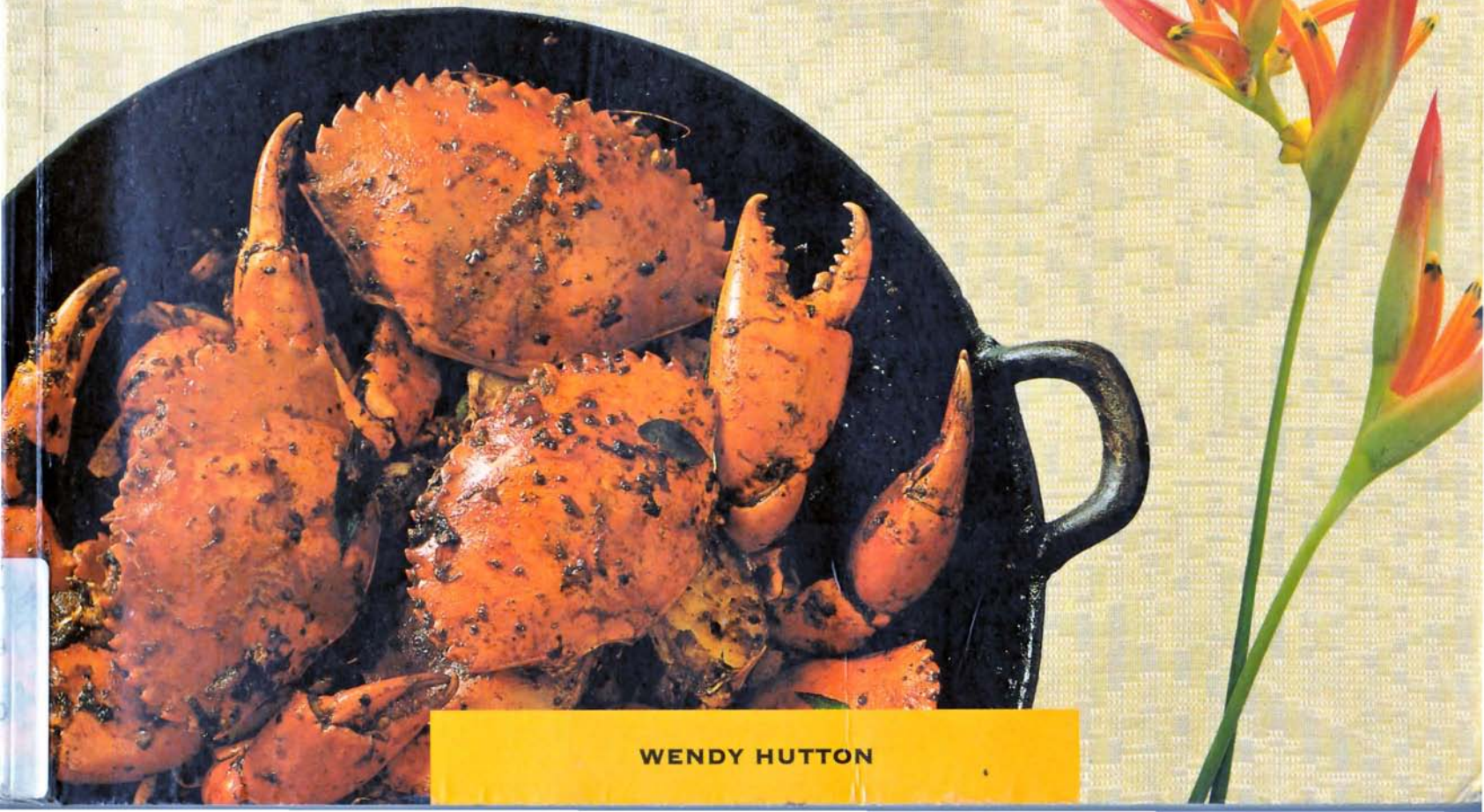
THE FOOD OF MALAYSIA

Authentic Recipes from the Crossroads of Asia



WENDY HUTTON

THE FOOD OF
MALAYSIA

Authentic Recipes from the Crossroads of Asia

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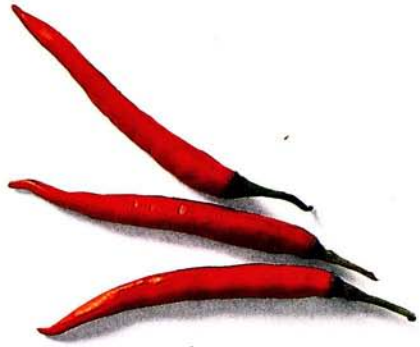

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Part One: Food in Malaysia

Where Asia's greatest cuisines meet and mingle

The Asian continent, encompassing the world's highest mountains, vast sandy deserts, millions of hectares of fertile rice fields, massive river deltas and tangled jungles, comes to its end in the peninsula known poetically to the ancient Greeks as the Golden Khersonese.

This golden land, the Malay peninsula, lies where the monsoons meet, and over the centuries, saw sailing ships arriving from the west from Arabia, India and, much later on, from Europe. From the east came Chinese junks, Siamese vessels and the inter-island sailing craft of Buginese and Javanese from the Indonesian archipelago.

The original people of the peninsula—known collectively as Orang Asli and now numbering less than 100,000—consist of about twenty different tribes belonging to two distinct linguistic groups. Later arrivals, who spread south from Yunan in southern China and began settling in Malaysia around 4,000 years ago, were the ancestors of today's dominant group, the Malays.

The Malay kingdom of Malacca was the greatest port in the east during its heyday in the 15th century. By then, Malacca's sultan had embraced Islam, brought by Indian Muslim traders, and the new religion gradually spread throughout the peninsula.

The lives of the Muslim Malays were to change during the 19th century when the British began, first in Penang, then in Malacca, to gain control over the Malay states. The British brought in huge numbers of Chinese and Indian workers, dramatically altering not only the ethnic and social structure of the country but its eating habits as well.

In 1963, the Federation of Malaysia was formed, with the states of the peninsula combining with the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. Malaysia's cuisines are as varied as its people. The Malays, Chinese and Indians continue to create their traditional foods, while cross-cultural borrowing in the kitchen has led to a number of uniquely "Malaysian" dishes.

Then there is the food of the Straits-born Chinese, whose culture and cuisine combine Malay and Chinese elements. Their so-called Nonya cuisine is arguably the most creative and delicious to be found in the country.

The Eurasians, too—especially those of Portuguese origin in Malacca—have developed their own dishes, while the peoples of Malaysian Borneo add even more variety to the culinary scene.

Whatever their background, Malaysians love food, whether its enjoyed at home with family and friends, eaten out at foodstalls or restaurants, or is part of a festive celebration. We invite you to join the feast: *selamat makan*!

Pages 4–5:
Viewing the coastline at sunset, it's easy to understand why the ancient Greeks called the Malay Peninsula "The Golden Khersonese."
Opposite:
The best of three major cultures—Malay, Chinese and Indian—combine with the food of many other ethnic groups to promise constant surprises.

A Land Where Nature Smiles

Of fertile fields and teeming seas, of dairies and durian orchards

Malaysia seems to have been blessed by nature, which saves its volcanic erruptions, its typhoons and lashing monsoon rains and floods for other parts of Asia.

Covering both the tip of the Asian peninsula and the northwestern part of Borneo, Malaysia, not surprisingly, varies in terrain and climate. The "typical" lush tropical landscape— emerald green rice paddies, golden beaches fringed by groves of coconut palms—exists, but it is only part of the picture.

Rice fields, an indelible part of the Malaysian landscape, nestle at the base of Sabah's Mount Kinabalu, the highest peak in Southeast Asia.

To the far north of the peninsula, near the Thai border, the climate is often dry and the landscape of endless paddy fields (for this is the "rice bowl" of Malaysia) relieved by abrupt limestone hills.

Much of the lush alluvial plain of the peninsula's west coast is planted with oil palm and rubber. This is ideal land for orchards too, and luscious tropical fruits such as the highly prized (and powerful smelling) durian, furry red rambutans, mangosteen, star fruit, *langsat* and other delights are grown here.

Contrasting with this, high on the main mountain range, the Banjaran Titiwangsa, the temperate climate of the Cameron Highlands makes it perfect not only for holiday makers but for the tea plantations and market gardens which provide much of the fresh produce that reaches the peninsula's markets. Malaysians can thus vary typical tropical vegetables (such as water spinach or *kangkung*, bamboo shoot, aubergine, okra, sweet potato and taro yam) with temperate-climate vegetables like cabbage, carrots, broccoli and capsicum.

The generally muddy coastal waters of the Malacca Straits on the west coast are ideal for crabs and shellfish, the mangrove swamps providing an important breeding ground for prawns and other marine life. The east coast, washed by the South China Sea, provides not only postcard-perfect beaches but ideal fishing grounds, and countless small *kampung* (villages) along the coast make their livelihood from the sea.

Some 500 kilometres or so across this sea lie

Sarawak and Sabah, characterised by traditional lifestyles and limited roads, especially in Sarawak, where rivers are still the major highways. Market produce is grown locally on a limited scale in Sarawak, where many inland peoples still rely largely on wild edible plants.

Although most of the populated areas of Sarawak are low lying, Sabah, by contrast, has a mountain range that culminates in Southeast Asia's tallest peak, Mount Kinabalu (4,101 metres). The local Dusun people living here grow "hill" (non-irrigated) rice, pineapples and bananas on the steep slopes of the Crocker Range, while dozens of market gardens around Kundasang (approximately 1,500 metres) grow a tremendous range of temperate-climate produce, including asparagus and mushrooms. Nearby, a dairy farm of contented Friesian's produces a large percentage of the state's milk, while there is also a tea plantation.

With such a variety of locally produced vegetables, fruits, seafood and poultry to choose from, Malaysians have few limits as to what they can create in the kitchen. The exception to this is that pork is forbidden to Muslims so it is never eaten by Malays and Indian Muslims.

A number of hotel restaurants, in deference to Muslim customers, substitute "turkey ham" or "beef bacon" for the real thing, and omit all pork dishes from their menu.

Seafood is very popular, and not just among the Malays and other coastal people. There is a superb array of fresh fish, prawns, squid, crabs, lobsters and a variety of shellfish, not forgetting small dried anchovies, dried prawns and salted fish.

Most of the beef and mutton consumed locally is imported (often "on the hoof" so that it can be slaughtered according to Muslim dietary laws), while the Chinese raise pork, their favourite meat.

Each ethnic group in Malaysia has its own way of transforming nature's bounty, which can come slathered with spices or subtly simple, rich in coconut milk gravy or bathed in a piquant sauce. Malaysians are so varied that it is often difficult to make generalisations.

For example, everyone's staple food is rice. But then again, noodles are widely eaten at breakfast, lunch and dinner! Perhaps the only universal quality is Malaysian food's irresistible flavour, whether it is a stick of sizzling Malay satay, pungent Indian mutton soup, Nonya chicken curry fragrant with lime leaves, Chinese pepper crab or Eurasian saltfish and pineapple curry.

The Golden Khersonese

Malay food: coconuts and spice and all things nice

Nobody who has sat under the stars on a warm tropical night and smelled the tantalising fragrance of satay—tiny spiced kebabs—sizzling over charcoal at a nearby food stall can resist Malay food.

For generations, the Malays lived a life relatively undisturbed by outside traders and invaders, apart from the heady days of the Malacca Sultanate. Dwelling along the coasts or river banks, the Malays enjoyed a largely peaceable existence, untroubled by the wars, famines and plagues that beset many other countries of the Asian continent.

Fish were abundant, rice grew in the paddies, wild and cultivated fruits and vegetables were available year-round in the constant climate. Fragrant herbs grew effortlessly, as did the indispensible coconut. Traditional meals were based on rice, with fish, vegetables and chilli-based *sambals* to add extra zing.

Travelling along today's highways that cross the peninsula from north to south and east to west, it comes as a surprise to learn that until well into the twentieth century, travel through what was a largely jungle-covered land was very limited. As a result, regional styles of cuisine developed in different parts of the Malay peninsula.

The northern states of Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan, all of which border on Thailand, and Trengganu, which rubs shoulders with Kelantan, show distinct Thai influences in their cuisine. So too, does Penang. A tangy and fragrant sourness is often added by the use of tamarind, sour carambola and limes, while fiery hot chillies so often present in Thai food are also popular in the northern Malaysian states.

Fresh herbs often give a special touch to northern dishes. In addition to the herbs commonly used throughout Malaysia—lemon grass, *pandan* leaf, the fragrant leaf of the kaffir lime and the pungent polygonum or *daun kesum*—they include a type of basil popular in Thailand (*daun kemangi*), leaves of a number of rhizomes such as turmeric and zedoary (known locally as *cekur*), and the wonderfully fragrant wild ginger bud.

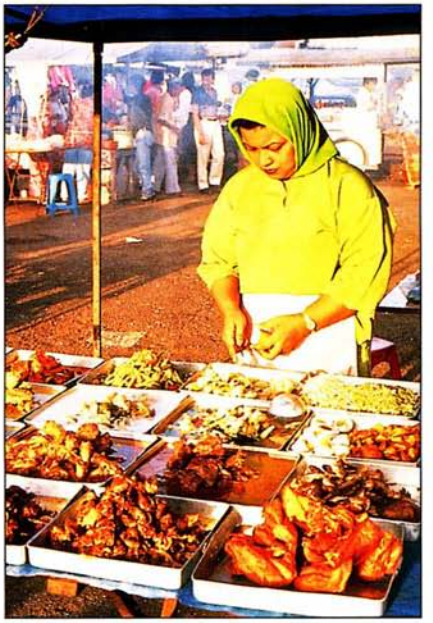
A popular northern dish, Nasi Ulam or Kerabu,

Opposite:
Traditionally built of wood and attap *(thatch), Malay houses show subtle differences in design throughout the Malay Peninsula. Malaccan homes often feature beautiful tiles.*

Left:
Malay weddings, where the bride and groom are treated as "king and queen for a day", are the occasion for splendid costumes and sumptuous feasts.

consists of rice mixed with as many fresh herbs as can be found in the garden or market. A platter of fresh herbs or *ulam* is sometimes served with a spicy chilli sauce, rice and other cooked dishes.

Settled largely by the Minangkabau people from West Sumatra, the central state of Negri Sembilan reflects its history in its food, with richly spiced dishes cooked in lashings of rich coconut milk, Rendang being a perfect example. The Malay cuisine of Johore, in the far south, includes a number of Javanese influences, as groups of Javanese settled here over the past couple of centuries.



***Right**: Food stalls throughout the country are popular for inexpensive, home-cooked food. Nasi Campur (mixed rice) allows diners to pick and choose from a variety of cooked Malay-style dishes which are eaten with rice.*

***Opposite**: Local markets are filled with a bewildering variety of fresh and dried produce. The Central Market in the northeastern town of Kota Bahru is renowned for its wide variety of fresh herbs, often used to make Nasi Ulam or Kerabu.*

Largely isolated from the rest of the peninsula until well into the twentieth century, the state of Pahang, with its dramatic jungled mountains and gorgeous sandy beaches, offers a relatively simple cuisine, with fish from the ocean or the rivers predominating.

Other states of Peninsular Malaysia tend to be more multi-racial in character, and the indigenous Malay food is less distinctive than that of other areas.

Despite regional differences, Malay food can be described as spicy and flavourful, although this does not necessarily mean chilli-hot. But you can rest assure that even if the main dishes are not hot, there'll be a chilli-based *sambal* on hand.

Traditional Southeast Asian spices have been joined over the centuries by Indian, Middle Eastern and Chinese spices, so the partnership of coriander and cumin (the basis of many Malay "curries") is joined by pepper, cardamom, star anise, and fenugreek—just to name a few of the many spices in the Malay cook's store cupboard.

Food without seasoning is unthinkable—even a simple slice of fried fish is rubbed with turmeric powder and salt before cooking. Many of the seasonings that enhance Malay food are not dried spices but rhizomes such as fresh turmeric and *lengkuas* (galangal), and other "wet" ingredients like chillies, onions and garlic.

Fresh seasonings and dried spices are normally pounded to a fine paste and cooked gently in oil before liquid—either creamy coconut milk or a sour broth—is added, together with the vegetables, meat or fish.

Food for the barbecue is also marinated or simmered in spices before cooking, and left-over rice will be turned into a tasty Nasi Goreng by first frying pounded onions and chillies.

With fish having always played such an important part in the Malay diet, it's not surprising that even today, tiny dried anchovies (*ikan bilis*) and dried shrimps are added to many dishes for flavour. And then there is dried shrimp paste or *belacan*, which, despite its pungent odour when raw and

***Right**: Rice, the staple food throughout the country, comes in many different varieties and colours, ranging from white to reddish brown and black.*
***Opposite**: Malaysia's much-loved cartoonist, Lat, remembers his childhood (and food) in the* kampung.

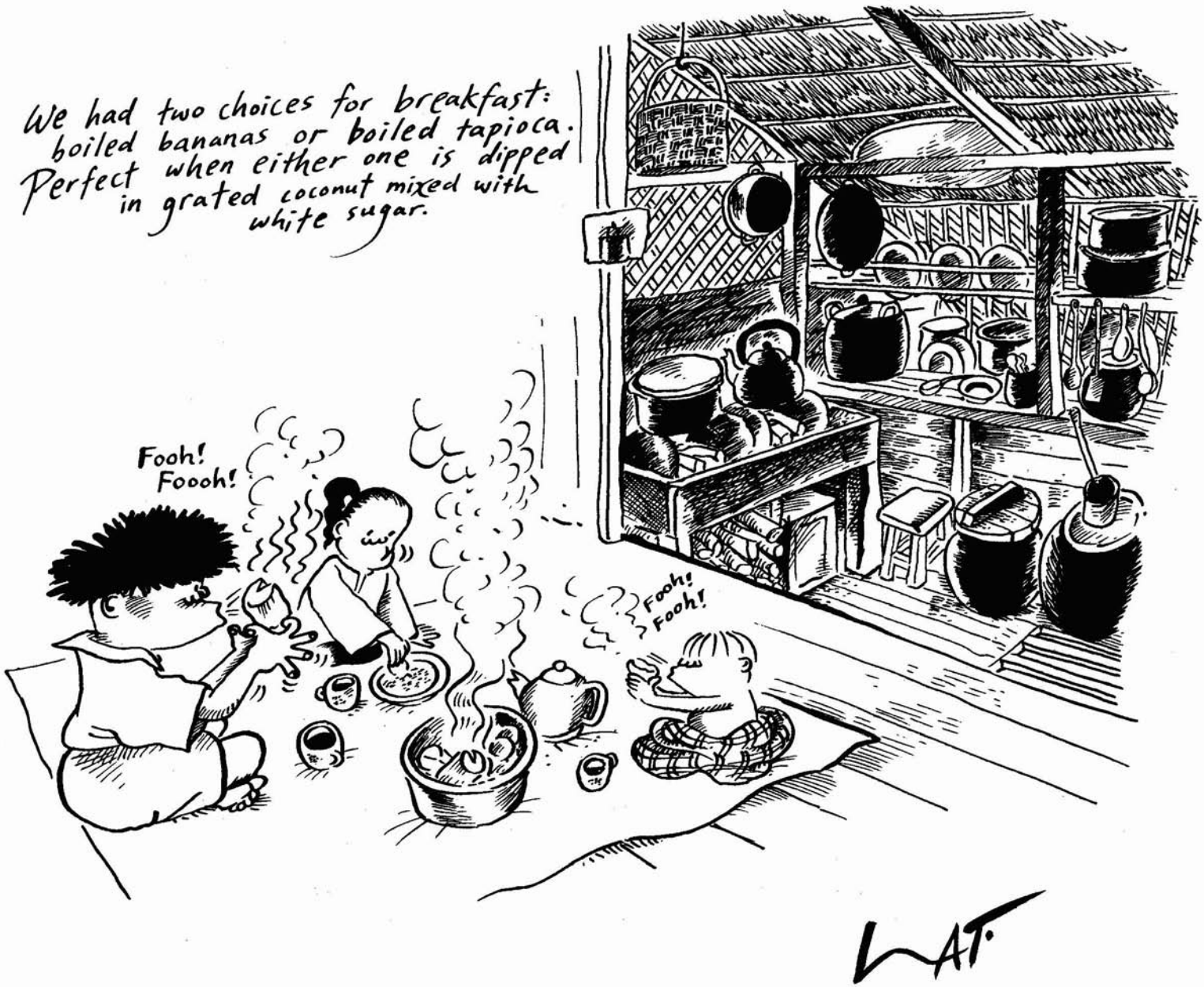
during cooking, gives an irresistible extra flavour to countless dishes.

The traditional *kampung* (village) house set in a cleanly swept yard shaded by coconuts, bananas and other fruit trees, with chickens pecking their way around a variety of kitchen herbs and vegetables, is increasingly something of the past.

Malaysia is modernising rapidly, and more and more of its people are moving into terraced or semi-detached houses with minimal gardens. Modern lifestyles leave little time for gardening or preparing complex dishes, and a number of Malay dishes are now prepared mainly for special festivals or weddings.

The *kenduri* or feast is one time when Malay cuisine comes into its own. All the women of the family or village take out their giant cooking pots and work virtually through the night, scraping and squeezing coconuts for milk, pounding mountains of shallots, garlic, chillies and spices, cutting and chopping, simmering and stirring, until they have created an impressive array of fish curries, *gulais* (curries) of vegetables bathed in coconut milk and seasoned perhaps with fresh prawns, coconut-rich *rendang* of beef or chicken, tingling hot prawn sambals, and a colourful array of desserts.

With their innate courtesy and hospitality, the Malays consider it an honour to be able to invite any fortunate passer-by to join in the *kenduri*. Women sit separately from the men, while babies crawl about or swing in a sarong cradle nearby. Children either peek shyly at the guest or race about happily —after, of course, enjoying the sumptuous feast that shows Malay cuisine at its best.


We had two choices for breakfast: boiled bananas or boiled tapioca. Perfect when either one is dipped in grated coconut mixed with white sugar.
Fooh! Foooh!
Fooh! Fooh!
LAT.

Celestial Cuisine in Nanyang

Chinese food: a two-way exchange of ingredients and culinary styles

Gas jets spurt like fire-breathing dragons, engulfing huge cast-iron woks where a mass of noodles is being tossed, seasoned and scooped by a perspiring Chinese chef. This scene is re-enacted at food stalls and restaurants throughout Malaysia, where Chinese cuisine has become an inseparable part of the magical Malaysian mix.

When Chinese merchants sailed their junks across the South China Sea, visiting the ports of north Borneo before lengthy trading sessions in Malacca, they set in train a process that was to have a profound influence on the region.

"Nanyang", the lands across the Great Southern Ocean, became renowned as a source of exotic ingredients and wealth. A few of these Chinese traders stayed on in the Malay peninsula, often marrying local women and forming the beginings of Peranakan or Straits-Chinese culture. However, it was not until the arrival of the British colonials in Singapore in 1819 that the stage was set for a huge wave of migration.

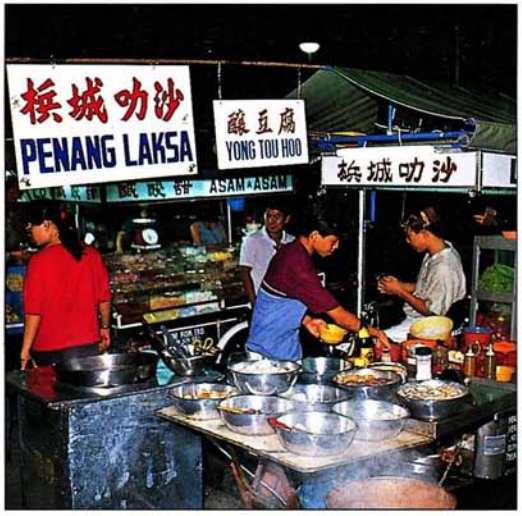
Thousands of Chinese workers poured into Singapore, and as tin was discovered in the Malay peninsula, many moved north to areas like Penang, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and Taiping. Others headed straight for the goldmines and coal fields of Sarawak, or moved to British North Borneo (now Sabah) to work on the land. More came later to labour in rubber plantations that soon altered the landscape and economy of the country. The Chinese brought with them the cooking styles of their homeland, mostly the southern provinces of Kwantung and Fukien, introducing the indigenous people of the Malay peninsula and northern Borneo to a range of ingredients now used by every ethnic group in Malaysia today: noodles, beansprouts, beancurd and soy sauce. Their technique of stir frying small portions of food in a little oil over very high heat in a conical frying pan or wok was also widely adopted. In turn, Malaysia's Chinese developed a penchant for spices and chilli. Any local coffee Chinese shop or restaurant will offer pickled green chillies or red chilli *sambal* to enliven noodles and rice-based meals. The Chinese borrow

***Opposite**: When wandering spirits get hungry, they can be downright malicious. Fortunately, they can be appeased with offerings of food, incense and street opera during the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts.*
***Left**: Eating is considered one of life's most pleasurable pastimes, especially by Malaysia's Chinese community.*

curry leaves from the Indians, use English condiments such as Worcestershire and tomato sauce, and add Indian and Malay spices to the cooking pot.

Almost any self-respecting Chinese cook can whip up a tasty Malay-style chicken or fish curry, and most versions of Laksa (a spicy noodle soup) are prepared by the Chinese. They're not averse to enjoying a number of Indian dishes too, especially some of the pungent fish curries and Indian breads such as *roti canai* and *murtabak*.

Chinese food is widely accepted as one of the world's greatest cuisines. One of its hallmarks is the ingenious use of ingredients—the Chinese cook's ability to transform "spare parts" into something that tastes like an exotic luxury is virtually legendary. The Chinese also place great importance on the contrast of colours, textures and flavours, both within a dish and the overall meal.



Food stalls serve not only customers who perch on often rickety stools to enjoy an al fresco meal, but also those buy take away food to enjoy at home or work.

The light, clean, non-greasy food of the Cantonese, and the pungent, chilli-hot cuisine of Szechuan are well known abroad, with northern cuisine from Peking also attracting a following. Although the dominant dialect group in Malaysia overall is Cantonese, there are large numbers of Hokkiens, Teochews, Hockchews from Foochow, Hakkas, Hainanese and Henghua, often concentrated in a particular town or region, each with its own style of cooking.

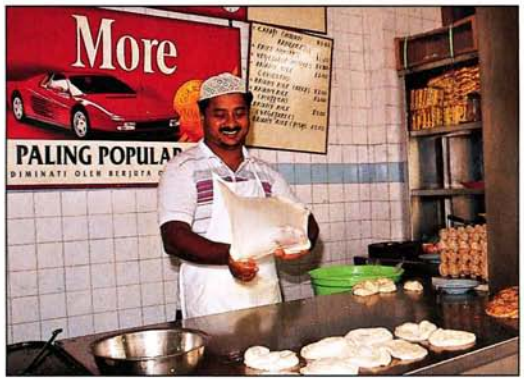
All this means that although Chinese cuisine in Malaysia seems somehow familiar, it's also full of delicious surprises. Like the fiery punch of crabs fried with black pepper, chillies, salted soya bean paste and curry leaves, or the creamy texture of fresh rice-flour noodles or *kway teow* fried with prawns, egg and bean sprouts. Malaysian Chinese, who enjoy their food so enthusiastically that one might almost wonder if they live to eat rather than eat to live, dine out frequently, at roadside stalls and in simple open-fronted coffee shops as well as more formal restaurants.

As many visitors have noted, Malaysia's Chinese always seem to be eating. After a light breakfast (maybe Western-style toast or perhaps noodles or steamed tit-bits known as *dim sum*), there's room for a mid-morning snack (an Indian curry puff or sweet Malay cake). Lunch could be any type of noodles or rice with Chinese, Malay or Indian side-dishes. Dinner might be a formal Cantonese meal, a vast spread of seafood at a restaurant, a family meal of rice, soup, vegetables and meat or seafood, or even Western fast-food. And before bed, there's probably room for just one more bowl of noodles or perhaps some fried bananas. With so many good things to eat, who can possibly limit themselves to just three meals a day?

Spicy Soul Mates

Indian food: banana leaf curry and flying bread: Malaysia's Indians make their mark

Visitors to Malaysia, noting the proliferation of Indian Muslim food stalls, of Indian restaurants advertising "Banana Leaf Curry", and the universal popularity of the pancake-like Indian bread, *roti canai*, might be surprised to learn that the Indian community makes up around only 10% of the nation's population.



Watching the preparation of Roti Canai, a Malaysian adaptation of an Indian bread, is almost as good as eating it.

Indian cuisines--especially those from the south, where most of Malaysia's Indians originated—share some similarities with Malay cuisine in their generous use of spices and coconut, so it took little encouragement for Indian food to catch on. And it's not just the easy-to-love flavours of Indian food that make it widely popular; Malay Muslims can rest assure that Muslim dietary laws will be observed in Indian Muslim restaurants.

Like their Chinese counterparts, Indian traders have been recorded in the region for more than a thousand years, but it was only in the 19th century that they came to Malaya in large numbers.

Most were brought in as contract labourers to work on the rubber estates, where miniature Indian villages complete with temples, schools and toddy shops grew up. Others came to work on the railways or in setting up the telecommunications network, while many Indian Muslims opened restaurants, textile shops or small sundry shops.

Although Malaysia has small communities of Sikhs from the Punjab region in India and Malayalees from Kerala, in the southwest, the overwhelming majority are Tamils from the southeastern state of Tamil Nadu (once Madras). Indian vegetarian food is justifiably popular in Malaysia. Southern vegetarian dishes are cleverly spiced (a popular combination is brown mustard seeds, blackgram *dhal*, curry leaves and dried chillies), often combined with coconut milk or freshly grated coconut for extra flavour. Steamed bread (*idli*) and the finest, crispiest pancake imaginable (*dosay*) are made from ground blackgram *dhal* and rice.

Traditionally, Hindu vegetarian meals with a mound of rice, some *dhal*, several spicy vegetable dishes, a glass of thin spicy soup (*rasam*), hot sour

pickle and yoghurt are served on the ultimate disposable plate: a square piece of freshly washed banana leaf. Indian Muslim restaurants offering more robust fare, with spicy dry mutton, crab curry, prawns, fried fish and other dishes as well as vegetables caught up with the idea, offering a spread of such dishes served on a banana leaf. Today, many restaurants simply advertise "banana leaf curry", meaning, of course, you eat what's spread on the leaf rather than the leaf itself.

India's most spectacular contribution to the Malaysian culinary scene is the *roti canai* (literally "flattened bread"). This is an adaptation of *roti paratha*, traditionally made with a mixture of white and wholemeal flour. The Malaysian version combines pure white flour, ghee and—the secret touch—a little evaporated or condensed milk for an extra light dough, which is kneaded and rolled into balls and left to stand.

Then comes the dramatic part, as the ball of dough is punched flat and then grasped at the edge and swung around in ever increasing circles to make a paper-thin pancake. This is then flattened, shaped and fried golden brown in ghee. Some theatrical *roti* makers will even throw the cooked bread into the air with a flourish before chopping it, karate fashion, with the edge of the hands.

Finally, the *roti canai* arrives crisp and crunchy, with bowls of curry gravy or *dhal* that normally accompany it. If the dough is filled with chopped onion and minced mutton or chicken before being fried, the resulting stuffed pancake, known as *murtabak*, is a meal in itself.

Malaysia's Indian hawkers have created unique versions of several local dishes, preparing foods you'd never find in India. Indian Mee Goreng, for example, combines fresh yellow Chinese noodles, beancurd, beansprouts and dried shrimp paste. Another noodle dish is the Indian version of Mee Siam (itself a Malay version of Thai-style noodles). And then there's Indian Rojak, vegetables and deep-fried fritters with a sweet sauce, totally different from the Malay and Nonya versions.

Indian curry puffs—pastry with a spicy potato filling—have been adopted enthusiastically by the Malays and Chinese, who create their own versions, sometimes adding pieces of cooked egg and chicken and creating a superb shortcrust pastry that is deep-fried to a melt-in-the-mouth texture.

Rich Indian mutton or lamb soup is a universal food-stall favourite, while Indian curries featuring chicken or fish are popular throughout Malaysia.

***Right**: Provision shops catering to Malaysia's southern Indians sell everything from betel nut to spices, garlands of jasmine to posters of the latest Tamil movie heart throb.*
***Opposite**: Indians have used spices to flavour food for thousands of years; Ayurvedic or traditional medicine also makes use of an astonishing range of dried roots, spices and herbs.*

PRAI
MALAYSIA

Feasts from the Jungle

Borneo food: ingenious ways with the abundant resources of Borneo

Smoked wild boar stir fried with freshly cut bamboo shoot, braised fern tips plucked from the jungle, sweet juicy clams fried with a slathering of chillies and herbs and raw fish salad drenched with lime juice are just some of the delights that come out of the kitchens of Malaysian Borneo.

Sabah and Sarawak are peopled by a bewildering range of ethnic groups, each with their own culinary specialities. The influx of Chinese immigrants during the 19th and early 20th centuries led to the adoption of certain Chinese cooking styles, especially stir frying, with seasonings such as soy sauce now found in almost every kitchen.

More recently, since the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the arrival of Indians, Malays and Chinese from Peninsular Malaysia have further influenced local styles so that today, traditional Borneo dishes are generally found only in the longhouses and remote villages of the interior, or in isolated coastal settlements.

Naturally, the diet of people living along the estuaries and coastline is dominated by seafood, and as the majority of coastal people are Muslim, pork is never eaten. Inland folk, predominantly non-Muslim, enjoy whatever can be caught in the rivers or forest, such as wild pig, deer and other jungle game.

Rice, especially "hill" rice grown in non-irrigated fields, is the favourite staple, although in some areas, a starchy porridge made from the sago palm is still enjoyed on occasion. The semi-nomadic Penan of Sarawak are renowned for their regular harvesting of the sago palm, as are the Bisaya in southwest Sabah, while some hill tribes such as Sabah's Muruts make a similar porridge from tapioca roots.

In many remote regions, the people of Sabah and Sarawak have developed methods of preserving food, an essential art in the absence of refrigeration. Although smoking is common, another speciality involves packing chunks of raw pork or fish into a wide bamboo or a glazed jar with salt and cooked rice. The flavour of this delicacy, which is left for several months to cure, is, to say the least, challenging to the uninitiated.

Lengths of fresh bamboo—the ubiquitous utensil of the jungle—are also packed with raw rice or meat and placed near a fire to steam.

Although cooking styles vary, the general trend is for coastal cuisines to be more "Malay" in their use of spices and coconut milk. Interior cooks make use of the abundance of wild vegetables (including several types of edible fern), herbs and sour fruits. Dried fish, dried prawns and dried shrimp paste are popular seasonings throughout Sabah and Sarawak, as they are in Peninsular Malaysia.

Opposite: *Wild bamboos make a readily available cooking utensil in the jungle. Just fill with soaked sticky rice, roast over a fire and enjoy!*

The Food of Love

Nonya cooking: a happy marriage of Chinese and Malay cuisines

Until about a decade ago, Malaysia's unique and arguably most delicious cuisine was in danger of disappearing. Fortunately for lovers of fine food, increasing consciousness of Malaysia's diverse heritage and a desire to preserve it seem to have saved the cuisine of the Nonyas. An increasing number of restaurants now feature Nonya cuisine, and the printing of Nonya recipes in books and magazines now means that enthusiastic cooks of any ethnic background can reproduce this cuisine at home.

Opposite: *These Straits Chinese or Nonya ladies, enjoying a game of cards, typify the fusion of Malay and Chinese elements which makes this culture and its cuisine so fascinating.*

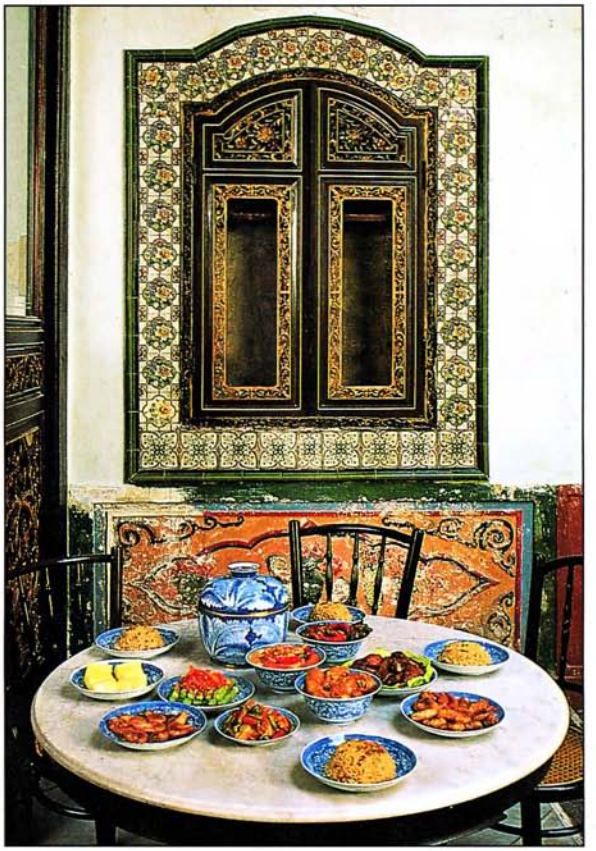
The so-called Straits-born Chinese, descendants of early settlers in Penang and Malacca, combine elements of both Chinese and Malay culture, quite unlike the mass of Chinese migrants who arrived around the turn of this century and up until the 1930s. These pioneering Chinese traders, many of whom became wealthy men, took Malay wives, although as time went on, children of these early mixed marriages generally married pure Chinese or the children of other Straits Chinese, thus greatly diluting any Malay blood they may have had.

The women, known as Nonyas, and the men, Babas, generally spoke a mixture of Malay and Chinese dialect, dressed in modified Malay style, and combined the best of both cuisines in the kitchen.

Typical Chinese ingredients (such as beancurd, soy sauce, preserved soya beans, black prawn paste, sesame seeds, dried mushrooms and dried lily buds) blended beautifully with Malay herbs, spices and fragrant roots. Being non-Muslim, the Straits Chinese cooked pork dishes Malay style, and added distinctive local ingredients (coconut milk, spices and sour tamarind juice) to basic Chinese recipes. The Nonya pork satay, served with a spicy pineapple sauce, demonstrates perfectly this felicitous blending of styles.

Straits-Chinese or Nonya cuisine often requires painstaking effort, and in increasingly modern households, there is little time to spend preparing complex dishes for everyday meals. In old-style households, the Nonya wife devoted all her time to running the home and supervising the kitchen, assisted by a small army of servants—a luxury few modern Malaysian women can indulge in. Another reason leading to the near-demise of Nonya cuisine is that today, many Nonya girls marry non-Straits-born Chinese, and therefore tend to cook the kind of food their Cantonese or Hokkien husbands are familiar with.

Distinct differences evolved between the cuisine of the Penang Nonyas and that of Malacca. In Penang, geographically much closer to Thailand, the Nonyas developed a passion for sour food (using lots of lime and tamarind juice), fiery hot chillies, fragrant herbs and pungent black prawn paste.



A spread of Nonya food, which is often time-consuming to prepare but well worth the effort.

Malacca Nonyas prepare food that is generally rich in coconut milk and Malay spices (such as coriander and cumin), and usually add more sugar than their northern counterparts.

Many simple and—in the days when every Malaysian house had its own garden—easily available fruits and vegetables were prepared in imaginative ways by the Nonyas. Unripe jackfruit, the heart of the banana bud, sweet potato leaves and tiny sour carambola or *belimbing* fruits were all transformed in the kitchen. The back garden also yielded the herbs that make Nonya food so aromatic: the kaffir lime leaf, pungent polygonum or *laksa* leaf, the camphor-smelling leaf of the rhizome, zedoary (*cekur* or *kencur*), fresh turmeric leaves and fragrant *pandan*.

One of the most popular Nonya dishes among Malaysians of any background is *laksa*, a rice-noodle soup which blends Malay seasonings with Chinese noodles. The Malacca Nonya version is rich in coconut milk, its basic spice paste made from dried prawns, fresh turmeric, chillies, dried shrimp paste, lemon grass and galangal (*lengkuas*).

Just one look and whiff of its fragrance will mark a Penang Nonya Laksa, which uses almost all the spice paste ingredients of the Malacca version, then adds the fragrant bud of the wild pink ginger, *laksa* leaf, pungent black prawn paste, shredded pineapple and raw onion, and drenches the lot with a tamarind–sour gravy with no coconut milk added.

Nonya cakes are renowned for their richness and variety. Most are based on Malay recipes, using inexpensive and easily available freshly grated tapioca root, sweet potato, *agar agar* gelatine, glutinous rice, palm sugar and coconut milk, with additional flavouring from the *pandan* leaf.

Little touches often transform an already delicious dish, such as the Malay favourite made with glutinous "black" rice, coconut milk, palm sugar and flavoured with *pandan*. Nonya cooks usually add a few "dragon's eyes", dried longan fruits, for an elusive smoky flavour.

As any Nonya cook would confirm, it's the little things that mean a lot.

When East Meets West

Eurasian food: a blending of styles, decidedly on the spicy side

What sort of food would you expect from a Christian cook living in Malaysia, whose ancestors were Portuguese, Malay, Javanese and Indian? To find the answer, head for Malacca, the historic town on Peninsular Malaysia's west coast, just 150 kilometres from the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

When the sultanate of Malacca fell to Portuguese invaders in 1511, the new rulers sought to establish control by encouraging Portuguese soldiers to marry local girls, and by bringing a number of Portuguese girls to marry local men.

Dancers, tracing their descent from the Portuguese who ruled Malacca during the 16th century entertain in the so-called Portuguese Settlement.

Portuguese rule ended more than 350 years ago, yet in the so-called Portuguese Settlement of Malacca, families have names such as Da Silva, Dias and Sequeira, and many of the people speak Cristao, a Portuguese-based dialect.

The only things Portuguese about Malacca's Eurasian community today are the Catholic faith and the names, and many of the people living here are often a mixture of several different Asian races.

The children of cross-cultural marriages during the 19th and 20th centuries, where one parent was most commonly English or Dutch, blend into Malaysian society today, and there are no enclaves of these Eurasians such as the one in Malacca.

Naturally, the mixed heritage of Malaysia's Eurasians has produced a fascinating cuisine with many excellent dishes. Cooks of Portuguese descent are renowned for their generous spicing, particularly in such dishes as Devil Curry, an adaptation of Goanese Vindaloo where vinegar and chillies vie for attention.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of Eurasian cooks is their readiness to borrow ingredients from many cultures. Malay herbs combine with a favourite Chinese cut, belly pork, Indian brown mustard, vinegar and a paste of freshly pounded chillies. English or Dutch-style dishes are transformed from innocuous stews to distinctly Eurasian dishes with the addition of a splash of oyster or soy sauce, a handful of spices, a few green chillies or sour tamarind juice.

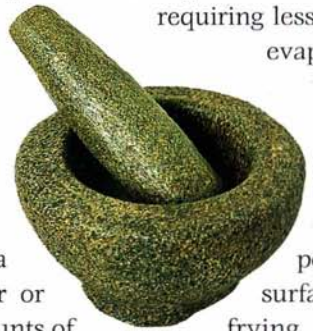
With so many culinary traditions to choose from, it's not surprising that Malaysia's Eurasians have produced such a repertoire of unusual dishes.

Part Two: The Malaysian Kitchen

From the mortar and pestle to the food processor: the kitchen modernises while flavours remain traditional

You don't need a range of exotic implements to cook Malaysian food. Most of the utensils found in the average Western kitchen can be adapted, although there are several items which will make preparation and cooking a great deal easier.

First and foremost is something to grind or crush the *rempah* or spice paste, the mixture of seasonings such as chillies, shallots and spices used to season many dishes. The rhythmic thump, thump, thump of a granite **mortar and pestle** is a familiar sound throughout the country, yet it requires effort, time and expertise to produce a beautifully smooth *rempah*, and the proper type of mortar and pestle is difficult to find abroad.



Many modern Malaysian cooks use a small strong **blender, coffee grinder** or **food processor** to deal with large amounts of ingredients, although the faithful old *batu lesong* is still kept for simple grinding tasks. (See Cooking Methods for details on how to prepare *rempah*.)

A large, solid wooden **chopping board**–in Malaysia, a cross section cut from a tree trunk–is used for a multitude of tasks, together with a solid **cleaver** with a blade about 8–10 cm (3–4 in) deep. Any Asian supplies store should stock this type of cleaver, which is far more effective at chopping up poultry, fish and crabs and mincing meat than a normal kitchen knife.

For all types of Malaysian cooking, particularly Chinese, a **wok** is essential. The shape of the conical wok (*kuali*) distributes the heat evenly, while its sloping sides ensure that when you're stir frying, food falls back into the pan and not out over the edge. It's also more practical for deep frying, requiring less oil, and allows the right amount of evaporation for many dishes which begin with lots of liquid and finish with a trace of very thick sauce.

Choose a heavy wok (it's safer as it's less likely to tip over) in cast iron or specially treated steel. It's now possible to get woks with a non-stick surface which can be scraped with metal frying "shovels", unlike delicate Teflon-covered surfaces. If you are using an electric cooker, try to find a wok that has a flattened bottom, or failing that, use a special ring that holds the wok securely.

To season a new wok before using it, rub the inside with a cut onion, then heat a little oil and fry the onion gently for a few minutes. Tip out the oil, rinse thoroughly with hot water and wipe the wok

***Pages 28–29**: A mouth-watering variety of fresh produce gives Malaysian cooks an endless array of options.*
***Opposite**: Traditional kitchens may look romantic, but most Malaysian cooks prefer today's modern Westernised kitchens.*
***Left**: Mortar and pestle.*

dry. Do not use abrasives and scourers on your wok; hot soapy water and a sponge should be sufficient.

A long-handled **frying spatula** for stir frying, as well as a circular **perforated ladle** for lifting out deep-fried food, are essential partners to your wok. While on the subject of woks, it should be noted that extremely high heat is needed when stir frying food. Many electric cookers cannot achieve the ideal heat, and Malaysian cooks—especially Chinese —insist on at least one gas fire, often with a double ring of gas jets. If you are using an old-style electric cooker which will not reach a very high heat and which cannot be quickly reduced in temperature, you might consider investing in a gas-fired ring for using with your wok.

A claypot (left) and bamboo steamer (bottom right).

Although by no means essential, a **claypot** or earthenware *belangah* is an attractive addition to your pots and pans. The first time you use it, you might like to try the Malaysian trick of gently frying a grated coconut until it turns brown. Discard the coconut, wipe the pot with a cloth and store. These pots are designed to go directly over a naked flame, and can also be used in an oven.

Steaming is a popular method of cooking. Chinese cooks traditionally used a bamboo **steamer** with a plaited cover, placed inside a wok where it sits a few centimetres above boiling water. Bamboo is an ideal material, as it absorbs any moisture that condenses on the cover.

If using multi-tiered metal steamer (which many Malaysian cooks now do), put a kitchen towel under the lid to prevent moisture from dripping back onto the food.

Stores selling woks usually have perforated metal disks which sit above the water level inside a wok and can be used instead of a single-tiered steamer. You can put wrapped parcels of food directly on this, or, in the case of unwrapped food, on a plate set over the perforated disk. Cover the wok with a large domed lid and keep the water level topped up and at a gentle simmer during steaming.

An electric **rice cooker** is a great boon if you're eating rice fairly often. It's foolproof, producing dry fluffy rice every time, and also keeps rice warm for late-comers. Alternatively, use a heavy saucepan with a firm-fitting lid.

Fresh **banana leaves** are often used to wrap bundles of food for steaming or grilling, the leaf holding in the moisture and seasonings and adding its subtle flavour to the food. A layer of greaseproof (not waxed) paper and another layer of aluminium foil or, if you prefer, just the foil—will make an adequate substitute.

A few less common kitchen tools are used for special dishes, although a little imagination will always produce substitutes. The four-spouted cup for making lacy *roti jala* pancakes can be replaced by a sauce dispenser; a heavy frying pan subsitutes for the metal griddle or *tawa* used for Indian breads, and large ladles will do the task of special flat mesh baskets used to remove noodles from boiling water.

Cooking Methods

Mastering a few basic techniques makes all the difference

Malaysian cooks use a wide range of cooking methods—shallow and deep frying, stir frying, braising, boiling, steaming and grilling over charcoal or under a grill.

It's essential to know how to prepare the *rempah* or basic seasoning paste required for many dishes. Before beginning, all the ingredients should be finely chopped. The principle is to grind or blend the toughest ingredients first, adding softer and wetter ingredients towards the end. Whether using a mortar and pestle, a blender or food processor, the order is the same. First grind any dried spices or nuts until fine, then add hard ingredients such as lemon grass, and galangal (already sliced or chopped in small pieces). Pound or process until fine then add softer rhizomes such as fresh turmeric and ginger, soaked dried chillies and sliced fresh chillies. When these are fine, add the ingredients that are full of moisture, such as chopped shallots and garlic, as well as soft shrimp paste.

If you are using a food processor or blender, you will probably need to add just a little liquid to keep the blades turning. If the *rempah* is to be fried, add a little of the specified amount of cooking oil, while if it is to be cooked in coconut milk, add some of this. While processing, you will probably need to stop the machine frequently to scrape down the sides. Continue until you have a fine paste.

Some cooks add water rather than the cooking medium to the blender; this means that the *rempah* will need to be cooked for a longer period of time before adding the other ingredients, to allow the water to evaporate and the *rempah* to eventually fry rather than just stew.

The spice paste is generally gently fried before any other liquid is added. Malaysian cooks will tell you to cook the *rempah* "until it smells fragrant" or "until the oil comes out", both accurate descriptions of what happens after 3–5 minutes of frying over gentle heat, stirring frequently. The spice paste must be thoroughly cooked at this stage or the resulting dish will have a raw taste to it.

Coconut milk is often added to the basic spice paste, generally in two stages. The thinner coconut milk is added, a little at a time, to the cooked spice paste, (often after pieces of meat or chicken have also been browned) and is stirred frequently, lifted with a ladle and poured back into the pan, until it comes to the boil. This process ensures the coconut milk does not curdle. The coconut gravy is then simmered gently, with the pan uncovered. The thick coconut milk or cream is added just before serving, heated through but not boiled, to enrich and thicken the gravy or sauce.

Malaysian Ingredients

A cornucopia of basic items, ranging from the familiar to the frankly exotic

Most Malaysian ingredients will already be known to those familiar with Chinese, Malay and Indian food. These ingredients are described in the following pages, and a range of substitutes suggested. Where local names may be of help in identification, these are provided in brackets. (M: Malay; C: Cantonese; T: Tamil; H: Hindi).

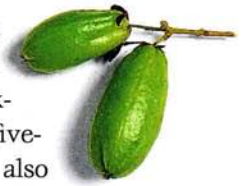
AGAR AGAR: a setting agent made from seaweed which hardens without refrigeration, used for cakes and desserts. Most Malaysian cooks prefer to use powdered *agar agar* rather than strands. One teaspoon will set 1–1½ cups of liquid.

ANCHOVIES, DRIED: see **Ikan Bilis**.

ASAM GELUGOR: dried slices of a sour fruit (*Garcinia atnoviridis*) used instead of tamarind pulp in some Malay and Nonya dishes; the latter can be used as a substitute. (see **Tamarind**)

BAMBOO SHOOTS: the fresh variety must be peeled, sliced and simmered in water for about 30 minutes. Boil canned bamboo shoots for 5 minutes to reduce any metallic flavour.

BELIMBING: known by its Malay name locally, though sometimes referred to as carambola elsewhere, this pale green acidic fruit about 5–8 cm (2–3 in) in length is added to curries, soups and pickles. A related plant with a large, five-edged sweet fruit, star fruit, is also known as *belimbing* or *belimbing manis*.



BEANCURD: several types of soya bean curd are used in Malaysia: **hard beancurd squares** (C: *tau kwa*); **soft beancurd** (C: *tau foo*); and **dried, deep-fried beancurd** (C: *tau foo pok*), used in *laksa* and some other vegetable dishes. Sheets of dried **beancurd skin** (C: *tau foo juk*) are used as a wrapping, while long strips of dried beancurd skin (C: tau foo kee) are added to meat or vegetable dishes. Small squares of **fermented bean curd** (C: *nam yee*), sold in jars, are used to flavour some Chinese dishes.

BEANSPROUTS: sprouted green mung peas are known locally as *taugeh*. Store in fridge covered with water for 2–3 days, changing water daily.

BLACK CHINESE VINEGAR: has a distinctive fragrance somewhat similar to balsamic vinegar and is used sparingly as a seasoning. Sometimes known as Tientsin vinegar.

BLACK SAUCE, SWEET: a thick, treacle-like

sauce used in fresh spring rolls (*popiah*) and some other dishes (C: *tim cheong*).

BROWN MUSTARD SEED: a small reddish-brown seed used mainly in southern Indian cooking (M: *biji sawi*; T: *kardugoo*).

CANDLENUT: a round, cream-coloured waxy nut (M: *buah keras*) pounded and added to Malay and Nonya dishes for flavour and texture. As they do not keep well, store in a jar in a freezer. Substitute macadamia nuts or almonds.

CARDAMOM: the tiny black seeds of this intensely fragrant spice are encased in fibrous, straw-coloured pods; smash the pod with a cleaver or pestle before using whole. Decorticated cardamom seeds can be used as a substitute. (M: *buah pelaga*; T: *elakai*; H: *illaichi*).

CELERY: local or "Chinese" celery (M: *daun saderi, daun sop*) is very different to the normal western variety, being much smaller with very slender stems and particularly pungent leaves. Used as a herb in soups and some other dishes. Substitute with the leaves of regular celery.

CHILLI: three main types of chilli (M: *cabai, lada, cili*) are used: the normal finger-length **red** (ripe) or **green** (immature) **chilli**; tiny fiery hot **bird's-eye chillies** (M: *cili padi*) and **dried red chillies** (M: *cili kering*). The latter must be broken in several pieces and soaked in warm water before being pounded. **Chilli powder** (M: *serbuk cili*) is made from finely ground dried chillies; do not confuse it with American chilli powder which is a blend of several seasonings as well as chilli. **Chilli oil**, available in small bottles, is used to enliven some Szechuan dishes.

CHIVES: "Chinese" or "coarse" chives, flat leaves about 30 cm (12 in) long, are used as a vegetable and seasoning. (C: *koo choy*).

CINNAMON: the thick, fragrant brown bark of a type of cassia (M: *kayu manis*) is used rather than true cinnamon. The latter, a native of Sri Lanka, is much finer in texture with a more delicate in flavour. Chunks of cassia bark, often used in meat and rice dishes, are preferable to powdered cinnamon.

CLOUD EAR FUNGUS: a shrivelled greyish-brown fungus also known as wood fungus (C: *mok yee*), this should be soaked in warm water before use. The wrinkled, ear-like pieces swell to at least four times their dried size.

CLOVES: a dark brown nail-shaped spice always used whole and not in powdered form.

COCONUT MILK: In Malaysia, the grated flesh of the mature coconut is squeezed with water to obtain coconut milk. Normally, ½ cup of water is added to 1 coconut and squeezed to obtain thick milk or coconut "cream"; the flesh is then kneaded with another 2½ cups of water and

squeezed to obtain thin coconut milk. The best substitutes are either powdered coconut (sometimes sold by the Malay name, *santan*) or canned coconut cream, both of which should be diluted according to the manufacturer's instructions.

CORIANDER: small beige-coloured seeds (M: *ketumbar*) which are a vital ingredient in most spice mixtures. **Fresh coriander leaf**, sometimes known as *cilantro* or Chinese parsley abroad, is widely used as a garnish.

CUMIN: frequently used in conjunction with coriander in curries, cumin (M: *jintan puteh*) is somewhat similar to the caraway seed in appearance.

CURRY LEAF: an important ingredient in southern Indian cuisine and also used in some Malay fish curries, this small, dark green leaf (M: *daun kari*; T: *karuvapillai*) can be found dried in some specialty stores abroad. No substitute.

DAUN KESUM: sold under its Malay name, and sometimes also referred to as *daun laksa* (literally "*laksa* leaf") because it is traditionally added to that dish. This particularly pungent herb (*Polygonum hydropiper*) is sometimes known as Vietnamese mint abroad, although it bears no resemblance to mint in either taste or appearance.

FENNEL: an important curry spice, slightly fatter and whitter than cumin and with a sweet fragrance (M: *jintan manis*). This is sometimes mistakenly called anise in Malaysia.

FENUGREEK: hard yellowish-brown seeds often used in fish curries. (M: *halba*).

FIVE-SPICE POWDER: as the name implies, this is a mixture of spices (star anise, fennel, cloves, cinnamon and Szechuan pepper). Used in some Chinese dishes (C: *ng heong fun*).

GALANGAL: known in Malaysia as *lengkuas* (*laos* in Indonesia), this ginger-like rhizome imparts a distinctive flavour to many dishes. Try to use young pinkish galangal as it is more tender. Always chop galangal before pounding or blending, as it is often tough. Slices of dried galangal must be soaked in boiling water for 20–30 minutes before use; a better substitute is the water-packed jars of sliced galangal exported from Thailand (where it is called *kha*).

GARLIC: an important seasoning in all Malaysian kitchens, the size of local garlic cloves is generally smaller than that of garlic sold in western countries. Use your own judgement when following the recipes.

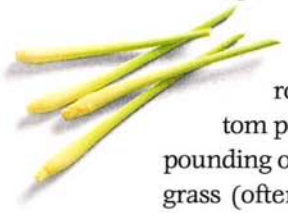
GINGER: fresh ginger (M: *halia*) is used by all ethnic groups in Malaysia. Scrape the skin off with a knife before using. Do not substitute with powdered ginger; any Chinese store overseas should stock this vital ingredient.

IKAN BILIS: known locally by the Malay name, these small salted dried anchovies are used to

season some dishes and also fried to make a crunchy side dish or appetiser. Chinese stores sell a much smaller, thinner variety no more than 2.5 cm (1 in) long, which has a slightly different flavour to the common variety; this is sometimes sold as "silver fish".

KRUPUK: dried wafers made from tapioca flour and prawns or fish; one Indonesian variety is made from a bitter nut, *melinjo* (*krupuk emping*). Make sure they are thoroughly dry before deep frying in oil for a few seconds, when they puff up spectacularly. Used as a garnish or snack.

LEMON GRASS: This fragrant lemony herb, which resembles a miniature leek, is used whole in soups or curries, or pounded as part of the basic spice mix. When pounding lemon grass (M: *serai*), slice off the root end and use only the tender bottom portion (about 10 cm/4 in); slice before pounding or blending. Dried or powdered lemon grass (often sold under the Indonesian name, *sereh*) can be used as a substitute. About 1 teaspoon powder equals 1 stalk of lemon grass.



LILY BUDS, DRIED: the Chinese aptly call these dried flowers "golden needles" (C: *khim chiam*). They are usually knotted for a neater appearance before being added to soups or vegetable dishes. No substitute.

LIME: two types of lime are used in Malaysia. The larger lime is slightly smaller and less pointed than the average lemon, and changes from green to yellow when ripe (M: *limau nipis*).

Slightly less acidic and more fragrant, the small round lime (M: *limau kesturi*) is sometimes known by its Filipino name, *calamansi*, abroad. Lemon juice can be substituted for large limes, while a mixture of lemon and orange juice (2 parts to 1) approximates the acidity and flavour of the smaller lime.

LIME LEAF, FRAGRANT: also known as kaffir lime leaf and widely used in Thai cuisine, this adds an intense fragrance to some Malay and Nonya dishes (M: *daun limau purut*). Dried leaves can be used as a substitute in cooked dishes.

MUSHROOMS, DRIED BLACK: Dried mushrooms, either dark black or deep brown in colour, should be soaked in warm water for 20 minutes before use, and the stems discarded.

NOODLES: many types of fresh and dried noodles are popular. Packs of dried noodles include wheat flour noodles (C: *mien*); dried rice vermicelli (C: *meehoon*), and mung pea noodles (C: *sohoon*), known as "cellophane" or transparent noodles. The main types of fresh noodles are thick round yellow noodles made from wheat flour and egg; thin round or narrow flat beige-coloured noodles made from wheat flour; wide, flat, white rice-flour noodles (C: *kway teow*), and round rice-flour noodles (*laksa* noodles).

NUTMEG: used in some savoury dishes and soups by Malay cooks. Try to buy the whole nut

(M: *buah pala*) and grate just before using as the powdered spice quickly loses its fragrance.

OYSTER SAUCE: frequently added to stir-fried vegetable dishes and meat, this sauce must be refrigerated after the bottle is opened. If you do not like monosodium glutamate, choose your brand carefully, as most are laden with this controversial addititive.

PALM SUGAR: generally sold in Malaysia as *gula melaka* (Malacca sugar), made from either the *aren* or coconut palm is available in hard golden-brown cylinders. Substitute with soft brown sugar and, if you have it, a touch of maple syrup.

PANDAN LEAF: see **Screwpine Leaf**

POLYGONUM: see **Daun Kesum**

PRAWNS, DRIED: Soak in warm water for about 5 minutes to soften before use, and discard any bits of hard shell. (M: *udang kering*; C: *hay bee*).

RICE: many types of rice are used, the most popular for daily meals being fragrant long-grain white rice; some Indian recipes require the nutty-flavoured *basmati* rice. Two types of glutinous rice are used in a number of sweet and savoury dishes: the cloudy white grain (M: *beras pulot*) and the brownish-black grain (*pulot hitam*). All rice should be thoroughly washed in several changes of water before using.

RICE WINE: a seasoning used in Chinese cuisine; available in small bottles. Substitute dry sherry.

ROSE ESSENCE: a heady fragrance from the Middle East, used in Malay desserts, drinks and some Indian rice dishes.

SALTED CABBAGE: this should be soaked in several changes of water for about 1 hour to remove excess saltiness. Used in some Chinese and Nonya dishes (C: *ham choy*).

SALTED DUCK EGG: a popular accompaniment to rice and savoury Malay dishes (M: *telor masin*). Wash off any black coating (often added to protect the egg), boil 10 minutes, then cut in half while still in the shell.

SALTED SOYA BEANS: usually sold in jars, with the soft soya beans in a brownish sauce (C: *tau cheong*). Mash slightly before using.

SCREWPINE (PANDAN) LEAF : imparts a distinct yet subtle flavour to a range of Malay and Nonya dishes, both savoury and sweet. The leaf (M: *daun pandan*) is either raked with the tines of a fork to release the fragrance and tied before being added to the pot, or pounded to extract the juice for desserts. Bottled essence can be substituted in desserts, but if fresh or dried *pandan* leaves are not available, omit from savoury dishes.

SESAME OIL: roasted sesame seeds are ground to make this oil, used only as a seasoning, not a frying medium, by Chinese cooks (C: *ma yau*).

SHALLOTS: tiny round red onions (M: *bawang merah*), usually pounded as part of a basic seasoning mix and

often finely sliced and crisp fried in oil over moderate heat to provide a garnish. If shallots are not available, try to use red or brown onion (1 medium onion equals about 6–8 shallots).

SHRIMP PASTE: shrimp paste varies in colour and moisture content. **Dried shrimp paste** (M: *belacan*), varies in colour and texture from purplish pink and rather moist to crumbly beige cakes or hard brownish-black squares. *Belacan* (pronounced "blachan"), which is sometimes sold overseas under the Indonesian name, *trasi*, must be cooked before eating; the easiest method is to wrap in a square of foil and grill or cook in a dry pan for a couple of minutes on each side, until dry and crumbly with a fragrant smell. *Belacan* must not be confused with the completely different **black shrimp paste** (M: *petis;* C: *hay koh*), a black treacly seasoning used by Nonya cooks.

SOY SAUCE: two types are used in Malaysian cooking; **light soy sauce**, (M: *kicap soya masin*) which is thinner, lighter in colour and saltier than **black soy sauce** (M: *kicap soya pekat*), which is generally used during long slow cooking or to give a dark colouring to a dish.

SPRING ONION: known also as scallion, green onion or most misleading, as shallot, the spring onion has slender stalks which are white at the base with dark green leaves (M: *daun bawang*).

TAMARIND: dried tamarind fruits are generally sold in pulp form in Malaysia, with the stones and some other fibrous matter still intact (M: *asam*). The juice, used to give acidity and fragrance to many dishes, is obtained by soaking the pulp in warm water for about 5 minutes, then squeezing to extract the juice which should be sieved before use. If using cleaned tamarind pulp without stones, halve the amounts specified in these recipes.

TURMERIC: a rhizome similar to ginger in appearance but with vivid yellow interior. Fresh turmeric (M: *kunyit*) is generally preferred in Malaysia, although 1 teaspoon of powdered turmeric can be used as a substitute for about 1 cm (½ in) fresh turmeric.

WILD GINGER BUD: the beautiful pink waxy flower from a variety of ginger sometimes known as torch ginger (botanical name has changed from *Phaeomeria speciosa* to *Etlingera elatior*). This flower, used in bud form, gives an inimitable flavour to some Malay and Nonya dishes. No substitute. (M: *bunga siantan* or *bunga kantan*).

YAM BEAN: native to tropical America, where it is known as *jicama*, the yam bean is a tuber with a beige skin and crisp white interior. Yam bean (M: *bengkuang*) is frequently mis-named turnip in Malaysia.

Part Three: The Recipes

Basic recipes for condiments, sauces and pickles precede those for main recipes, which begin on page 46

Malaysians generally present several dishes at each meal, allowing diners to serve themselves to whatever they want. As a general rule, these recipes will serve 4–6 people as part of a meal with rice and 2–3 other dishes.

SAMBAL BELACAN

12 large red chillies, roughly chopped
2 tablespoons dried shrimp paste, roasted
150 ml (5 oz) water
4 tablespoons lime juice

Blend the chillies and shrimp paste with the water. Season to taste with lime juice.

CUCUMBER AND PINEAPPLE SAMBAL

1 medium cucumber, peeled, seeded and diced
½ pineapple, peeled and diced
1 red chilli, finely sliced
1 medium red onion, peeled and sliced
½ teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons sugar
3 tablespoons lime juice

Combine all ingredients in salad bowl and mix thoroughly.

Measurements

Measurements in this book are given in volume as far as possible: 1 measuring **cup** contains 250 ml (roughly 8 oz); 1 **teaspoon** contains 5 ml, while 1 **tablespoon** contains 15 ml or the equivalent of 3 teaspoons. Australian readers please note that the standard Australian measuring spoon is larger, containing 20 ml or 4 teaspoons, so use only ¾ tablespoon when following the recipes. Where metric measurements are given, approximate imperial conversions follow in brackets.

Time Estimates

Time estimates for preparation only (excluding cooking) are based on the assumption that a food processor or blender will be used.

- ◔ *quick and very easy to prepare*
- ◔◔ *relatively easy; less than 15 minutes preparation*
- ◔◔◔ *takes more than 15 minutes to prepare*

***Opposite**: (anti-clockwise from top) Pickled Papaya, Stuffed Chilli Pickle and Dried Cucumber Acar.*

PICKLED PAPAYA

1 under-ripe papaya (750 g/1½ lb)
100 ml (3 fl oz) distilled white vinegar
3 tablespoons sugar
½ teaspoon salt
5 bird's-eye chillies, left whole

Peel the papaya, cut in half lengthwise and remove the seeds. Cut into very thin slices. Wash and dry the papaya. Bring the vinegar, sugar and salt to the boil. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Mix well with the chillies and papaya and keep overnight. Store in a covered container in the refrigerator up to 1 month.

Opposite: Mango Kerabu (left) and Cucumber & Pineapple Sambal (right).

DRIED CUCUMBER ACAR

2 cucumbers (750 g/1½ lb)
1 large carrot

Dressing:

¾ cup distilled white vinegar
3 tablespoons sugar
½ teaspoon salt
pinch of turmeric powder
2 shallots, sliced
1 cm (½ in) ginger, julienned
1 clove garlic, peeled and shredded
2 tablespoons raisins

Cut the cucumber in half lengthwise and remove the seeds. Cut into matchstick pieces 3 cm (1½ in) in length. Peel the carrot and cut the same size as the cucumber. Dry the cucumber and carrot in the hot sun for 2 hours. Combine the vinegar, sugar, salt and turmeric and bring to the boil. Remove immediately from the heat and allow to cool. Add the shallot, ginger, garlic and raisins and mix with the cucumber and carrot. Store in the refrigerator up to 1 month.

MANGO CHUTNEY

2–3 green unripe mangoes (500 g/1 lb)

Spice Paste:

6 shallots
5 cloves garlic
2 cm (¾ in) ginger
3 red chillies
½ teaspoon white poppy seeds
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon fennel
1 teaspoon coriander
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
2 tablespoons oil

Whole Spices:

3 cloves
4 cm (2½ in) cinnamon stick
3 star anise
1 cardamom pod, lightly bruised

Dressing:

4 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
½ cup distilled white vinegar
1 heaped tablespoon raisins

Peel the mangoes and cut the flesh into 1 cm (½ in) dice.

To prepare spice paste, chop shallots, garlic, ginger and chillies finely and blend with spice seeds until fine, adding a little oil to keep the blades turning. Heat remaining oil in pan, add the blended

ingredients and whole spices and cook gently for 20 minutes. Combine dressing ingredients and add, together with the mangoes, to the pan. Reduce to low heat and cook for about ½ hour until mangoes are soft. Can be kept in the refrigerator for 1 month.

Add more sugar (1½–2 tablespoons) if mango is very sour.

CHILLI PEANUTS WITH ANCHOVIES

4 red chillies
1 shallot
1 tablespoon oil
½ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon sugar
100 g (3½ oz) roasted peanuts with skin
30 g (1 oz) anchovies (*ikan bilis*), heads and intestinal tract removed and fried till crisp

Blend the chillies and shallot together. Heat the oil and gently fry the blended mixture with the salt and sugar for 1 minute. Add the peanuts and anchovies. Stir fry for 3 minutes and remove from heat. Keep in a bottle in the fridge up to 3 weeks.

MANGO KERABU

1 large ripe mango (500 g/1 lb), peeled
4 mint leaves, roughly chopped
4 coriander leaves, roughly chopped

Dressing:

5 red chillies
150 ml (5 fl oz) water
3 tablespoons sugar
150 ml (5 fl oz) distilled white vinegar
1 teaspoon salt

Make dressing by blending chillies with water. Add the remaining dressing ingredients and bring to the boil. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Dice the mango and combine with mint, coriander and dressing. Serve immediately.

CHILLI SAUCE

5 red chillies, roughly chopped
150 ml (5 fl oz) water
3 tablespoons sugar
150 ml (5 fl oz) distilled white vinegar
1 teaspoon salt

Blend chillies with water. Add the remaining ingredients and bring to the boil. Remove from heat and allow to cool.

CHILLI GINGER SAUCE

6 red chillies, roughly chopped
3 cm (1¼ in) ginger, chopped
4 cloves garlic
150 ml (5 fl oz) water
2 teaspoons salt
5 tablespoons sugar
5 tablespoons lime juice
1 teaspoon sesame oil

Blend together the chilli, ginger, garlic and water. Season to taste with the salt, sugar, lime juice and sesame oil.

FRIED SHALLOTS

200 g (7½ oz) shallots
1 litre (4 cups) oil

Soak shallots in salted water for 5 minutes. Peel the skin and slice thinly. Drain the shallots and dry thoroughly on a cloth. Heat oil in wok and fry shallots over moderate heat until golden brown.

Remove, drain and leave until cold. Store in airtight container. Do not add salt or the shallots will soften.

STUFFED CHILLI PICKLE

½ small green unripe papaya or 1 small white radish
1 teaspoon salt
8 green beans, slashed lengthwise halfway down
13 cm (5 in) cucumber, halved crosswise then cut in coarse pieces
16 shallots, pricked all over with a fork
½ cup cauliflower florets, broken very small
½ cup cabbage, coarsely cut
5 cm (2 in) ginger, finely shredded
5 cloves garlic, very thinly sliced
1 teaspoon brown mustard seed
2 heaped tablespoon dried prawns, soaked in warm water
15 cm (6 in) fresh turmeric
2 teaspoons dried shrimp paste
2 tablespoons oil
2 cups white vinegar
¾ cup sugar
1 teaspoon salt
4 green chillies

If using papaya, begin 2–3 days in advance by shredding the peeled papaya as finely as possible. Sprinkle with 1 teaspoon salt, mix well and sun dry until completely dried up. Alternatively, finely shred the white radish, salt and dry for about ½ day in the sun.

When the papaya or radish are almost dry, prepare the beans, cucumber, shallots, cauliflower and cabbage, sprinkle with about 1 teaspoon salt and leave in sun for 2–3 hours. Salt the ginger and garlic and sun dry separately for 2–3 hours.

Blend the mustard seed until fine, add dried prawns and blend until fine, then add turmeric, garlic and shrimp paste and blend, adding a little of the oil if necessary. Heat the remaining oil and fry blended ingredients until fragrant, then mix in vinegar, sugar and salt, stirring until dissolved. Remove from heat.

Choose straight chillies with the stalk still on. Slit each chilli lengthwise, leaving 0.5 cm (¼ in) at both ends still intact. Use a sharp knife to carefully remove the seeds and membrane from inside the chillies. Stuff each chilli with a little of the dried papaya, then mix with the prepared vegetables and ginger.

Pack carefully into jars. Pour over the vinegar mix and close tightly. Leave 3 days before serving. Will keep at least 1 month without refrigeration.

POPIAH

The Nonya version of a popular Chinese snack using fresh wrappers is very substantial and suitable as a lunch dish with something sweet and sinful to follow. ⓯⓯⓯

¼ cup oil
3 eggs

Filling:

8 shallots
8 cloves garlic
2 tablespoons salted soya bean paste
500 g (1 lb) yam bean (*bengkuang*), shredded
2 hard beancurd, fried and shredded
1 teaspoon black soy sauce
100 g (3½ oz) peeled prawns
70 g (2½ oz) cabbage, shredded
100 g (3½ oz) green beans, shredded
4 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons salt

For Serving:

20 large fresh popiah skins
sweet black sauce (*tim cheong*) to taste
10 cloves garlic, blended to make garlic paste
6 red chillies, blended to a paste
long-leafed lettuce
100 g (3½ oz) beansprouts, blanched
50 g (1½ oz) dry roasted peanuts, skinned and coarsely ground
3 tablespoons fried shallots

Beat the eggs lightly, grease an omelette pan with ½ teaspoon oil and make 3 very thin omelettes. When cooked, shred finely and set aside.

To make the **filling**, crush the shallots and garlic together with the salted soya bean paste. Heat ¼ cup oil and fry until fragrant. Reserve 3 teaspoons of this. Leave the remaining fried paste in the pan and add the yam bean.Cook for 5 minutes until softened, then add the fried beancurd and cook until very soft. Season with black soy sauce.

Use 1 teaspoon of the reserved seasoning and put in a separate pan to fry the prawns until cooked; repeat with the cabbage, then with the beans. Mix into the cooked yam bean and add sugar and salt. Leave to cool.

To serve, put all prepared ingredients on the table. Place a popiah skin on a flat surface and spread with a little sweet black sauce, garlic paste and chilli paste. Place one lettuce leaf on top, put on a spoonful of the cooked filling, a few prawns, some cabbage, beans, beansprouts, peanuts and shallots. Fold in the sides, roll up and serve immediately.

Helpful hints: Popiah wrappers are similar to the fresh wrappers used for Filipino *lumpia*. If neither are available, use egg roll wrappers.

CURRY PUFFS

A perennial favourite originally created by Indian cooks and enjoyed by every Malaysian.

Filling:

5 tablespoons oil
1 medium red or brown onion, finely chopped
1½ teaspoons *kurma* powder or chicken curry powder
2 teaspoons meat or chicken curry powder
1 teaspoon chilli powder
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
200 gm (7½ oz) cooked chicken, finely diced
2 large potatoes, boiled and finely diced
1½ teaspoons sugar
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon salt

Pastry:

500 g (1 lb) plain flour
150 g (5 oz) butter or Planta margarine
200 ml (just over ¾ cup) water
½ teaspoon salt

Make the **filling** first. Heat oil and fry the onion gently until golden brown. Add the curry powders, chilli, turmeric and fry gently. Add the chicken, potatoes, sugar, pepper and salt and cook for 5 minutes. Mix well and leave aside to cool.

To make **pastry,** mix flour with margarine, water and salt and knead well. Let it rest for ½ hour. Cut the dough into circles 8 cm (3 in) in diameter. Take a tablespoon of filling and place in centre. Fold pastry over to make a half circle and crimp at edges. Deep fry in hot oil until golden.

Helpful hints: Not all margarines are suitable for pastry, owing to their high moisture content. The Malaysian brand, Planta, is recommended; Crisco is a suitable substitute.

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TOP HATS

Kuih Pie Tee

Delightfully crisp little cases with a vegetable filling are a Nonya teatime treat. With a rim on the cases, they resemble "top hats". ◉◉◉

Top Hat Cases:

1 mould (*see photograph opposite*)
100 g (3½ oz) plain flour
½ teaspoon rice flour
1 egg, beaten
1 cup (8 fl oz) water
a pinch of salt
oil for deep frying

Top Hat Filling:

1 tablespoon oil
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
90 g (3 oz) peeled prawns, chopped
500 g (1 lb) yam bean (*bengkuang*), shredded
200 g (7½ oz) carrot, shredded
pepper to taste
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar

Garnish:

shredded omelette made with 1 beaten egg
finely chopped spring onion
1 red chilli, finely sliced

Make the **cases** first. Put both flours in mixing bowl, add egg, water and salt and mix well. Whisk the batter until smooth and then put through a sieve. Pour into a glass.

Heat oil in saucepan with the mould in the oil. Turn down the heat to medium. Dip mould into batter so that it is thoroughly coated. The mould must not be too hot; the batter should not sizzle when the mould is placed in. Allow the excess batter to dip off and plunge the mould into oil.

To make the batter separate from the mould while frying, start jiggling it lightly up and down as soon as it is placed in the oil. The batter should open and slip away from the mould with slight shaking. Let the case cook until light brown. Store in airtight container.

To make the **filling**, heat the oil in a saucepan and fry the garlic and prawn until lightly brown. Add the yam bean and carrot and season with the pepper, salt and sugar. Cook for 5 minutes.

To **serve**, put a little of the filling in top hat cases. Garnish and serve with chilli sauce.

Helpful hints: It may take a few tries to successfully create the "top hat" cases. It is essential that the oil is the right temperature and that the mould is sufficiently hot so that when it is dipped into the glass of batter, the batter clings to the mould until the batter-covered mould is put back into the hot oil. If you cannot make the batter form a rim to the "top hat", don't worry; many cooks just make straight-sided cases which are easier to achieve.

SUPERIOR WON TON SOUP

Stuffed ravioli-like dumplings or *won ton* in soup are found in Chinese restaurants throughout the world, but this version is definitely a cut above, thanks to the excellent stock made with dried scallops, chicken and anchovies. ❹❹❹

200 g (7½ oz) prawns, peeled and deveined
15 *won ton* skins
1½ litres (6 cups) basic stock (*see below*)
100 g (3½ oz) snow peas, blanched for a few seconds
6 dried black mushroom, soaked, boiled until soft, thinly sliced
salt and pepper

Basic Stock:

3 dried scallops
300 g (10 oz) boneless chicken
½ cup very fine dried Chinese anchovies
3 litres (12 cups) water
2 cloves garlic, smashed
1 cm (½ in) ginger, sliced
½ teaspoon white peppercorns
200 g (7½ oz) carrot
300 g (10 oz) celery

Filling:

200 g (7½ oz) prawns, peeled
150 g (5 oz) boneless chicken or pork
100 g (3½ oz) water chestnuts, peeled
50 g (1½ oz) dried black fungus or 2 dried mushrooms, soaked
1 tablespoon oyster sauce
½ teaspoon salt
a dash of sesame oil
2 tablespoons sugar
a dash of Chinese wine
1 egg, beaten
2 tablespoons cornflour
1 tablespoon light soy sauce

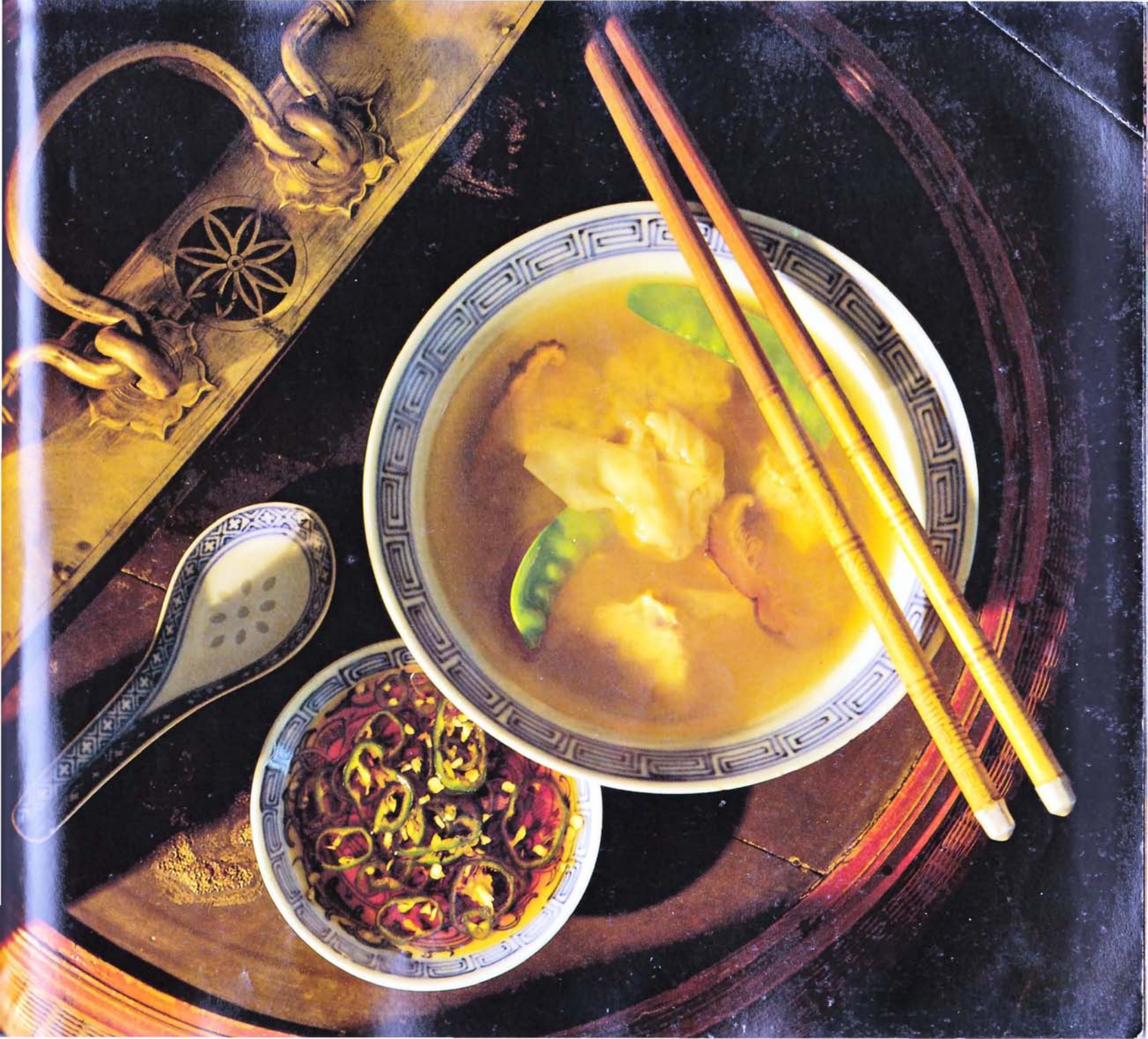
Prepare the **stock** first by putting all the ingredients in a pot and bringing to the boil. Remove the scum from the surface, lower heat and simmer covered for 2 hours. Strain thoroughly before using.

To make the **filling**, chop the prawns, chicken, water chestnuts and fungus together with a cleaver until fine. Mix in all other filling ingredients.

Put 1 small spoonful of the filling in the centre of a *won ton* wrapper and squeeze the edges together in the centre. Repeat until all the filling is used.

Bring the cooked stock to the boil, add the *won ton* and simmer for 3–5 minutes or until they rise to the top. Add the snow peas, mushrooms, salt and pepper and serve immediately.

Helpful hints: If you are unable to find dried scallops (which are very expensive), 500 g (1 lb) of pork bones can substituted to make the stock.



SOP KAMBING

Indian Mutton Soup

Hawkers throughout Malaysia offer Sop Kambing, a rich, meaty stew, which is popular as a substantial breakfast or late-night supper. Serve with Roti Canai or chunks of crusty French bread.

250 g (8 oz) shallots
10 cloves garlic
3 cm ($1\frac{1}{4}$ in) ginger
1 cup ghee or oil
750 g ($1\frac{1}{2}$ lb) lamb chops
6 large onions, sliced
150 g (5 oz) *kurma* spice powder or chicken curry powder
5 cm (2 in) cinnamon stick
1 cardamom pod
2 star anise
3 litres (12 cups) water or lamb stock
1 cup green peas
1 large carrot, cubed
3 sprigs fresh coriander
6 spring onions, roughly chopped
6 Chinese celery leaves, roughy chopped
2 tablespoons salt
$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon white pepper

Garnish:

fried shallots
fresh coriander leaves

Blend the shallots, garlic and ginger to a paste. Remove the meat from the bones and cut meat into small cubes. Roast the bones in a hot oven until brown.

Heat ghee and fry the sliced onions until golden, then add ground ingredients and fry for about 30 seconds before adding spice powder, turmeric, cinnamon, cardamom and star anise. Stir fry for 1 minute then add water, roasted bones, cubed lamb, peas, carrot, fresh coriander, spring onions and celery leaves. Simmer uncovered until the lamb is cooked then add salt, sugar and pepper to taste.

Garnish with fried shallots and sprigs of coriander when serving.

Helpful hints: Roasting the bones, while not essential, gives a richer flavour to the soup.

Opposite: *(anti-clockwise from top) Sop Kambing, Rasam and* pappadum. *Recipe for Rasam is* *on page 56.*

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RASAM & FRIED KWAY TEOW

Spicy Crab Claw Soup & Fried Rice-Flour Noodles

RASAM

A version of Southern Indian Rasam, believed to be an aid to digestion. ◔◔

2 whole crabs
3 shallots, coarsely pounded
5 cloves garlic, skin left on, roughly smashed
2.5 cm (1 in) ginger, roughly smashed
3 tablespoons oil
5 dried chillies, torn in half
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
2 teaspoons black peppercorns, finely ground
1 tablespoon coriander, finely ground
1½ teaspoons fennel, finely ground
1½ teaspoons cumin, finely ground
1 teaspoon fenugreek, finely ground
2 sprigs curry leaves
100 g (3½ oz) tamarind pulp
1 litre (4 cups) water
1½ teaspoons salt
2 large ripe tomatoes, halved

Remove the legs and claws from the crabs and keep the body aside for another dish.

Pound or blend the shallots, garlic and ginger. Heat oil and fry pounded mixture together with chillies for 2 minutes. Add turmeric, ground spices and curry leaves. Fry for another minute.

Soak the tamarind in the water for 10 minutes. Squeeze and strain to obtain juice. Add juice to the pot and bring to boil. Add the crab claws and salt and squeeze in the pulp from the tomatoes. Add squeezed skin of the tomato and simmer for 5 minutes. Serve with rice and vegetable dishes.

FRIED KWAY TEOW

A great hawker or foodstall favourite using fresh rice-flour noodles. ◔◔

½ cup oil
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 whole chicken breast, shredded
6-8 prawns, peeled
50 g cockles (*see hum*) or mussels
300 g (10 oz) dried chillies, soaked and blended to a paste
500 g (1 lb) flat rice-flour noodles (*kway teow*)
½ cup chopped garlic chives
200 g (7½ oz) beansprouts
a pinch of salt
2 tablespoons black soy sauce
4 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 eggs, beaten

Heat the oil in the wok. Saute the garlic for a few seconds then add chicken breast, prawns and cockles. Stir for a few moments then add 5 tablespoons of the chilli paste. Cook for 5 minutes. Add noodles, chives, beansprouts and egg, season with salt and soy sauces and stir fry until the noodles are thoroughly heated. Serve immediately.

Opposite: *Fried Kway Teow. Photo of Rasam is on page 55.*

YEN'S BROWN NOODLES

This version of a Cantonese-style dish, deep-fried coils of crisp, light brown noodles bathed in a delicate but delicious sauce, is named after the chef who created it. Packets of *yee mien* noodles should be available in any Chinese provision shop.

150 g (5 oz) dry brown noodles (*yee mien*)
150 g (5 oz) mustard greens or spinach
oil for frying
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
150 g (5 oz) peeled prawns
150 g (5 oz) chicken or pork, shredded
3 cups water
2 tablespoons oyster sauce
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
½ teaspoon black soy sauce
½ teaspoon sesame oil
½ teaspoon white pepper
1 heaped tablespoon cornflour, blended in 3 tablespoons water
2 eggs, lightly beaten

Put the noodles in a colander, sprinkle with a little cold water and leave aside to soften.

Discard hard ends of the vegetable and cut in 4 cm (1½ in) lengths. Heat about 5 cm (2 in) oil in a wok and fry the noodles, a handful at a time, turning over until crisp and golden (about 1 minute). Drain and set aside. Repeat with remaining noodles. Arrange noodles in a large wide bowl or deep serving platter.

Leave about 1 tablespoon of oil in the wok and fry the garlic for a few seconds, then add prawns and chicken or pork. Stir fry until they are cooked, then add water and all seasonings. Bring to the boil, add vegetables and simmer for a minute. Add the cornflour mixture and cook, stirring, until the sauce thickens and clears. Pour in the beaten egg, stir and pour over the noodles and serve immediately.

Helpful hints: The noodles should have a firm although not crisp and crunchy texture after cooking. The distinctive flavour of this type of noodle makes this simple-sounding dish well worth sampling.

MEE SIAM

Spicy Noodles

This dish, prepared by Nonya and Malay cooks, is an interpretation of Thai-style noodles. Fine rice-flour noodles are served in a spicy gravy permeated with the fragrance of salted soya beans and tamarind. ✪✪✪

2 cups oil
4 tablespoons salted soya beans, crushed
1 cup tamarind pulp, soaked in 1 cup water for juice
5 cups water
6 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon black soy sauce
2 tablespoons light soy sauce

Spice Paste:

25–30 large dried red chillies, cut and soaked
40 shallots
12 candlenuts
8 cloves garlic

For Serving:

500 g (1 lb) rice vermicelli, soaked in cold water until soft
500 g (1 lb) beansprouts, tails removed
500 g (1 lb) prawns, peeled and fried in a little oil
3 eggs, beaten, cooked in thin omelettes and shredded
1 large or 2 small cucumbers, peeled and cut in matchsticks
150 g (5 oz) garlic chives, cut in 2.5 cm (1 in) lengths
3 hard beancurd, deep-fried and slivered

Garnish:

3 tablespoons fried shallots
2 fresh red chillies, sliced
6 small limes or lemon wedges

Set aside 1 cup of oil. Chop spice paste ingredients finely then blend. Keep half the blended ingredients aside for frying the noodles.

Put 1 cup of oil in a wok and fry the blended paste over low heat for 10 minutes. Add the salted soya beans, fry for a few seconds then add the tamarind juice, 5 cups water, sugar, salt and simmer for 5 minutes. Taste and add more sugar if liked. Remove from heat.

Heat the second cup of oil and fry the reserved blended ingredients over low heat for 10 minutes. Add 1 teaspoon salt, both lots of soy sauce, drained noodles and beansprouts. Stir thoroughly, sprinkle with a little water and remove from heat.

To serve the Mee Siam, divide the noodle mixture between 6 large bowls. Top with the prawns, omelette, beancurd, cucumbers and chives. Pour over the gravy and garnish each portion with some fried shallots, sliced chilli and a small lime.

Helpful hints: To reduce the heat of the gravy, discard the seeds that fall to the bottom of the bowl when you soak the chillies.

INDIAN MEE GORENG

Indian Fried Noodles

Although noodles were brought to Malaysia by the Chinese, all other ethnic groups have enthusiastically adapted them to suit their tastes. This version is a dish you certainly couldn't find in India. ◔◔

10 dried chillies, soaked in hot water
½ cup oil
1 teaspoon dried shrimp paste
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
150 g (5 oz) prawns, peeled and deveined
150 g (5 oz) boneless chicken, shredded
400 g (13 oz) fresh yellow noodles
100 g (3½ oz) mustard greens
100 g (3½ oz) beansprouts
2 hard beancurd, deep fried and sliced
3 tablespoons light soy sauce
1 teaspoon salt
1 red chilli, sliced
1 green chilli, sliced
sprig of coriander leaves, roughly chopped
sprig of Chinese celery leaves, roughly chopped
2 spring onions, sliced
2 tablespoons fried shallots
6 small fresh limes, halved

Blend softened chillies to a paste, adding a little oil if necessary. Keep aside 2 tablespoons of oil and heat the remainder over medium heat, add dried shrimp paste and fry for 1 minute. Add chilli paste, reduce heat to low and cook, stirring from time to time, for 30 minutes. Remove from pan.

Heat the 2 tablespoons of oil in a wok. Add garlic, cooked chilli paste, prawns and chicken and fry for 3 minutes. Add noodles and fry over medium heat for 3 minutes. Add mustard greens and beansprouts. Fry for 2 minutes then add beancurd and stir fry for 3 minutes. Lastly add soy sauce and salt mixed together. Stir fry for 1 minute.

Garnish with fresh chillies, coriander, celery leaf, spring onions, fried shallots and fresh lime and serve immediately.

Helpful hints: Cabbage or spinach can be used instead of mustard greens if preferred.

LAKSA LEMAK

Noodles in Spicy Coconut-milk Gravy

This Nonya version of Laksa, a spicy noodle dish, comes from Malacca. Although it takes some time to prepare, it is well worth the effort. ④④

½ cup oil
6 sprigs polygonum (*daun kesum*)
2 wild ginger buds, finely sliced
6 cups water
1½ cups thick coconut milk
1 heaped tablespoon sugar
salt to taste
500 g (1 lb) thin fresh yellow noodles, or dried noodles, cooked and drained
150 g (5 oz) beansprouts, blanched
1 chicken breast, steamed and shredded
100 g (3½ oz) peeled prawns, steamed

Spice Paste:

8 red chillies
10 shallots
1 lemon grass
2 cm (¾ in) galangal
0.5 cm (¼ in) fresh turmeric
½ teaspoon dried shrimp paste

Garnish:

3 sprigs polygonum (*daun kesum*), sliced
1 wild ginger bud, finely sliced
1 cucumber, in matchstick shreds
3 eggs, beaten, made into thin omelettes and shredded
2 red chillies, sliced
2 spring onions, finely sliced
6 tablespoons Sambal Belacan (see page 41)
6 small round limes or lemon wedges

Chop and blend all the **spice paste** ingredients finely, adding a little of the oil if necessary to keep the blades turning. Heat remaining oil and gently fry the blended ingredients for 10 minutes, stirring from time to time. Add the polygonum, ginger buds and water and bring to the boil. Add thick coconut milk, sugar and salt. Reduce heat and simmer very gently, uncovered, for 10–15 minutes.

To serve, plunge noodles in boiling water for a few seconds, to heat through. Divide the noodles, chicken, beansprouts and prawns between 6 individual noodle bowls and top with the shredded polygonum and ginger bud. Pour gravy on top and add a little cucumber, omelette, chillies and spring onion. Serve with the Sambal Belacan and cut limes in a separate dish.

Helpful hints: The gravy can be prepared in advance, and the garnishing ingredients readied although not sliced to ensure maximum fragrance and freshness. If fresh noodles are not available, use dried rice vermicelli (*meehoon*) or any dried Chinese wheat-flour noodles.

醋白庄

ASAM LAKSA PENANG

Sour Penang Noodle Soup

There are two definite groups within Malaysia: those whose favourite is Laksa Lemak, a spicy noodle soup bathed in coconut milk gravy, and those who prefer the sour, fragrant Penang version, which has a pronounced fishy flavour. Try both and see which group you fall into. ◔◔◔

600 g (1¼ lb) small Chubb mackerel (*ikan kembong*)
1.5 litres (6 cups) water
5 tablespoons tamarind pulp, soaked and squeezed for juice
2 wild ginger buds, sliced
3 sprigs polygonum (*daun kesum*), sliced
½–1 tablespoon sugar, to taste
600 g (1¼ lb) fresh coarse rice noodles (*laksa*)

Spice Paste:

5 shallots
2 lemon grass
2.5 cm (1 in) fresh turmeric
3 dried red chillies, soaked in warm water
6 fresh red chillies
1 teaspoon dried shrimp paste

Garnish:

1 cucumber, peeled and shredded
6 sprigs polygonum (*daun kesum*), sliced
few sprigs mint, torn
3 large red onions, sliced
3 red chillies, sliced
½ fresh pineapple, cut in shreds
small bowl of black prawn paste (*hay koh*), diluted in a little warm water

Simmer the cleaned whole fish in water until cooked. Remove fish, cool, and remove the flesh from the bones. Break up the flesh. Strain the stock carefully and return to a large pan with the fish, tamarind juice, ginger bud, polygonum and sugar.

Blend the spice paste ingredients finely and add to the fish stock. Simmer for 20–30 minutes.

Prepare all garnish ingredients. Blanch the noodles in boiling water, drain and divide between 6 bowls. Pour over the fish stock and garnish the top of each bowl. Allow diners to add the black prawn paste themselves, as the taste is rather pungent.

Helpful hints: If Chubb mackerel is not available, choose another well-flavoured fish to ensure the soup has its characteristic fishy taste.

MALAYSIA
SUZUKI

NASI KERABU

Rice with Fresh Herbs

The wonderfully fragrant herbs normally found in a kitchen garden are combined with rice to make this popular Kelantan dish, traditionally served with Ayam Percik, either coconut or beef Serunding and a chilli *sambal*. (Rice with lots of fresh herbs is known as Nasi Ulam in other northern states of Peninsular Malaysia.) As many of these herbs do not have a common English name and are not available outside Malaysia, suggested substitutes are given below.

1 cup rice
1½ cups water
2 stalks of lemon grass, smashed
2 cm (¾ in) galangal, smashed
2 screwpine leaves
2 fragrant lime leaves
2 tablespoons thick coconut milk
½ teaspoon salt

Accompaniments:

2 *daun maduk*
1 *cekur* (zedoary) leaf
2 fragrant lime leaves
1 sprig *daun kemangi* (basil)
1 *daun kunyit* (turmeric leaf)
1 sprig *daun kesum* (polygonum)
1 stalk *daun renganga*
3 *daun salam*
1 sprig *daun selum*
1 lemon grass
1 shallot
1 *bunga kantan* (wild ginger bud)
1 cucumber

Wash the rice well and place in the rice cooker or pan together with the water, lemon grass, galangal, screwpine leaf, fragrant lime leaf, coconut milk and salt. Bring to boil and cook, stirring once or twice.

Slice all the accompaniment ingredients very finely and arrange on a large platter. Pile the cooked rice in the centre and allow each diner to mix through the herbs according to taste. Serve with Coconut Serunding (page 112) and Ayam Percik (page 96).

Helpful hints: Alternative herbs and accompaniments include raw green beans, any type of basil, pennywort or *kottu kala* (known in Malaysia as *daun pegaga*), coriander leaf, nasturtium leaf, mint, watercress, celery leaves, cabbage or lettuce etc. In some Malaysian markets, bundles of mixed herbs are sold under the name *ulam*, specially for use in this dish.

NASI BOKHARI

Spicy Rice with Chicken

Arab and Indian influences are evident in this richly flavoured rice, similar to a *pilau* or *biryani*. It is particularly popular in the northeastern states of Peninsular Malaysia. ⏱⏱⏱

½ chicken, cut into serving pieces
2 tablespoons tomato paste
½ cup evaporated milk
1 tablespoon lime juice
3 tablespoons fried shallots
salt to taste
3 tablespoons ghee
2 cups long grain rice (preferably Basmati)

Spice Paste for Marinade:

3 tablespoons coriander
2 tablespoons fennel
1 tablespoon cumin
2 cm (¾ in) cinnamon stick
2 cloves
2 cardamom pods, husk discarded
2 star anise
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
1 teaspoon turmeric powder
1 teaspoon white poppy seeds (optional)
5 shallots
2 cloves garlic
2 cm (¾ in) ginger
6 almonds
½ cup water

Spice Paste for Rice:

2 shallots
2 cloves garlic
2.5 cm (1 in)ginger
1 tablespoon ghee
2 cm (¾ in) cinnamon stick
1 clove
1 star anise
1 cardamom pod
2 tablespoons evaporated milk

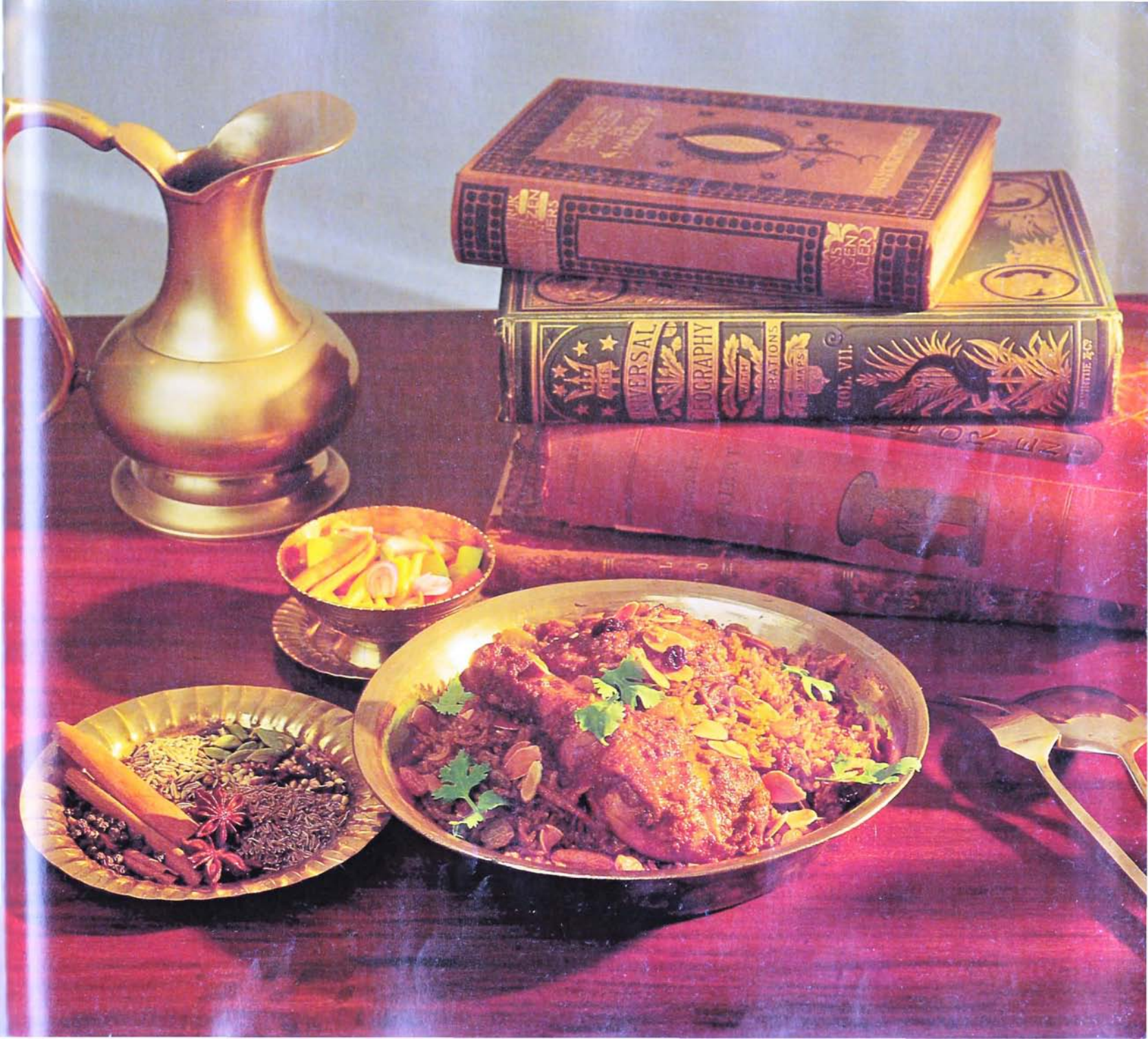
Garnish:

½ cup raisins
3 tablespoons fried shallots
1 tablespoon roasted flaked almonds

Grind dry spices first, then grind remaining marinade spice paste ingredients and combine. Marinate chicken with the spices, tomato paste, milk, shallots and salt and keep overnight.

Heat ghee in a saucepan and fry chicken over low heat, adding water if it threatens to burn. Saute for ½ hour or until the chicken is cooked. Separate the chicken from the gravy and set chicken aside.

To cook the rice, puree the shallots, garlic, ginger and ¼ cup water. Saute in ghee and add the remaining spices. Cook until brown with the chicken gravy and milk, stirring occasionally. When the rice is dried and cooked, add raisins, fried shallots, almonds and chicken and stir well.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ROTI JALA AND SAMBAL UDANG

Lacy Pancakes and Prawn Sambal

ROTI JALA

These lovely lacy pancakes are an ideal accompaniment to any dish with lots of rich gravy and are particularly popular during the Muslim fasting month and on special occasions. ◔◔

500 g (1 lb) plain flour
2 cups fresh milk
2 eggs
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
1 tablespoon oil
1 tablespoon ghee or butter

Sift the flour into a large bowl. Beat the milk and eggs together and mix with the flour, salt and turmeric. Stir until the batter becomes smooth then put through a sieve. Add oil and set aside.

Heat a non-stick pan and brush surface with ghee or butter. Pour a ladleful of batter into a special Roti Jala funnel or substitute (see below) and make quick circular movements over the pan to form a lacy pattern. When the pancake is cooked, remove and fold into a triangular shape. Repeat the method until all the batter is finished.

Helpful hints: The Roti Jala funnel is a cup with four spouts; an alternative is a plastic sauce dispenser with a reasonably wide hole.

PRAWN SAMBAL

This piquant Malay prawn dish is a firm favourite throughout the country. Take care not to overcook the prawns or they will become tough. ◔◔

½ cup oil
2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 teaspoon salt
3 tablespoons thick coconut milk
4 tablespoons lime juice
500 g (1 lb) medium-sized prawns, peeled and deveined

Spice Paste:

10 red chillies
3 medium red onions
2.5 cm (1 in) galangal
10 cloves garlic
3 candlenuts

Chop all the spice paste ingredients then blend until fine, adding a little of the oil if necessary to keep the blades turning.

Heat oil in a saucepan and fry the blended ingredients for about 10 minutes until fragrant. Add brown sugar, salt and coconut milk and bring to the boil. Add lime juice and prawns and simmer for 5 minutes or until the prawns are cooked.

SAMBAL TERONG & NASI KEMULI

Aubergine with Basil & Nonya Wedding Rice

SAMBAL TERONG

This Nonya recipe, using the small Asian aubergines, adds basil for extra flavour.

500 g (1 lb) small aubergines
2 cups oil
½ cup basil sprigs
salt and sugar to taste

Spice Paste:

3 red chillies
5 shallots
4 cloves garlic
1 teaspoon dried prawns, soaked
1 tablespoon salted soya bean paste

Opposite: Sambal Terong (left) and Nasi Kemuli (right).

Wash the aubergines but do not peel. Halve lengthwise and cut into 4 cm (1½ in) pieces. Chop and blend the spice paste ingredients finely and set aside.

Reserve 4 tablespoons oil and heat the rest in a wok. When the oil is very hot, deep fry the aubergine pieces until brown. Drain and set aside. Drain out the oil, wipe the wok and add the reserved oil. Gently fry the blended ingredients for 5 minutes, then add fried aubergines, basil, salt and sugar. Cook, stirring frequently, for 2–3 minutes, then serve.

NASI KEMULI

Simple but tasty, Nasi Kemuli is a must at Nonya weddings.

1 cup coriander seeds
5 cm (2 in) cinnamon stick
2 whole star anise
2 cloves
1 cardamom pod
4 cups water
1 tablespoon ghee
1½ cups long-grain rice, washed and drained
1 teaspoon dark soy sauce
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons raisins

Spice Paste:

3 shallots
1 cm (½ in) ginger
2 cloves garlic

Combine all the wholes spices with water and simmer uncovered until the liquid is reduced to 2 cups.

Pound or blend the spice paste then gently fry in the ghee. Remove from the heat and add rice, soy sauce and salt. Mix well and add the 2 cups of liquid together with all the whole spices. Stir well, cover and cook until the rice is done. Add the raisins just before serving.

ROTI CANAI

Flaky Fried Indian Bread

A really good Roti Canai is feather-light, crisp, non-greasy and, some would say, the Indian community's greatest culinary contribution to Malaysia. Roti Canai is a much lighter, flakier version of an Indian bread known as Roti Paratha.

1 kg (2 lb) plain flour
2 eggs, beaten
1 teaspoon salt
2-3 tablespoons sugar
100 g (3½ oz) butter or ghee, melted
2 cups water
2 tablespoons condensed milk
½ cup ghee or oil for frying

Sift flour into a mixing bowl, add eggs, salt, sugar and melted butter. Combine water with the condensed milk and add to the mixture. Mix well to make a soft dough. Roll dough into a ball and cover with a damp cloth. Leave to rest in a warm place for 30 minutes.

Divide dough into 12 small balls. Coat in ghee or oil, cover and leave to rest for a minimum 20 minutes or up to 4 hours.

Heat an iron griddle or heavy pan, and coat with oil. Flatten dough balls and stretch out as far as possible. Fold edges inward, continue until you have a round shape 15 cm (6 in) in diameter. This is required to give the bread a layered texture. Fry the *roti* individually until crisp and golden, adding more ghee or oil as necessary.

Helpful hints: It takes great skill to swing out the dough in circles to stretch it paper thin, as the "Roti man" does with a theatrical flourish. Most home cooks use the bottom of a very large cooking pan and with oiled hands, slowly stretch and push the dough out.

இன்றைய
20 ஆண்டு நகர்
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NONYA PRAWN SALAD

Contrasting flavours and textures bring excitement to this combination of vegetables, prawns, sweet sauce, herbs and crunchy prawn crackers. It makes a delicious starter to any meal. ◐◐

1 long-leaf or Romaine lettuce, torn in long shreds
2 small carrots, cut in matchsticks
2 small white radishes, cut in matchsticks
2 small cucumbers, halved lengthwise, seeded and sliced
1 starfruit, halved lengthwise and sliced (optional)
3 tomatoes, cut in wedges
500 g (1 lb) prawns, steamed and peeled

Dressing:

15 red chillies
6–8 cloves garlic
1 cup bottled Chinese plum sauce
1 cup sweet red sauce or 1 cup light palm sugar syrup
½ cup lime juice
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
1 tablespoon sesame oil
½ cup peanuts, fried, skins removed and coarsely ground

Garnish:

deep-fried prawn crackers
fresh coriander leaves
fried shallots

Put chillies and garlic in blender and grind, adding a little of the plum sauce to keep blades turning. When finely ground, add rest of dressing ingredients except peanuts, blend just to combine and set aside. Add the peanuts only just before serving.

Prepare all remaining ingredients. Divide between 6 plates, starting with the lettuce and finishing with the prawns. Pour on the dressing and top with garnish.

Helpful hints: Different brands of plum sauce and sweet red Chinese sauce vary in their sugar content, so take care to adjust the dressing to your taste. If using palm sugar syrup, boil 200 g (7½ oz) palm sugar with 1½ cups water until dissolved.

NANAS LEMAK & IKAN ASAM PEDAS

Pineapple and Prawn Curry & Hot Sour Fish Curry

Opposite: Nanas Lemak (left) and Ikan Asam Pedas (right) shown here with Dried Cucumber Acar. Recipe for Dried Cucumber Acar is on page 42.

NANAS LEMAK

Pineapples are a perfect partner to fish and prawns, as this piquant curry proves.

½ fresh just-ripe pineapple
2 cups water
4 tablespoons oil
200 g (7½ oz) medium sized prawns, peeled and deveined
1½ cups thick coconut milk
salt to taste

Spice Paste:

6 red chillies
8 shallots
2 lemon grass
½ teaspoon dried shrimp paste
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
2 cloves garlic

Peel the pineapple, remove the eyes and cut lengthwise into quarters. Remove core, wash and cut into small triangular pieces.

Blend spice paste ingredients with ½ cup water. Heat oil in a saucepan and fry the blended ingredients for 5 minutes. Add pineapple, stir fry for another 5 minutes then add remaining 1½ cups water. When pineapple is soft, add the prawns, coconut milk and salt. Stir well, lower heat and simmer uncovered for 10 minutes.

IKAN ASAM PEDAS

Fragrant and spicy, this curry is enriched by a touch of coconut milk.

⅓ cup oil
1 cm (½ in) galangal, smashed
2 slices *asam gelugor*, or 1 heaped tablespoon tamarind pulp, soaked in water for juice
2½ cups water
6 thick fish fillets or cutlets
4 sprigs polgonum (*daun kesum*), chopped
salt to taste
1 teaspoon sugar
3 tablespoons thick coconut milk

Spice Paste:

15 dried chillies, soaked in hot water
2 candlenuts
4 cloves garlic
10 shallots
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
1 cup water

Chop and blend spice paste ingredients finely. Heat oil in a saucepan then fry the galangal and blended ingredients for 5 minutes. Add the *asam gelugor* or tamarind pulp. Add ½ cup of water and cook for another 5 minutes. Add the rest of the water and bring to boil. Add the fish, polygonum, salt and sugar and coconut milk and simmer, uncovered, for another 5 minutes.

SPICY PRAWNS IN A SARONG

A "sarong" of fragrant screwpine or banana leaf adds both a decorative touch and a subtle fragrance to the prawns; it can, however, be omitted if not available. ◐◐

500 g (1 lb) large prawns, shelled and deveined
salt and pepper to taste
1 tablespoon lime juice
½ cup thick coconut milk
1 tablespoon palm sugar syrup
***pandan* leaves or 4 cm (1½ in) wide strips of banana leaf**

Spice Paste:

8 shallots
5 cloves garlic
2 candlenuts
2 cm (¾ in) galangal
6 red chillies
1 teaspooon turmeric powder
1 teaspoon dried shrimp paste

Opposite: *Spicy Prawns in a Sarong shown here with Nasi Bokhari. Recipe for Nasi Bokhari is on page 70.*

Season the prawns with salt, pepper and lime juice. Chop and blend the spice paste ingredients until fine. Combine the blended ingredients, coconut milk, palm sugar syrup and prawns. Marinate for 4–6 hours.

Wrap the centre of each prawn with a screwpine leaf or strip of banana leaf and secure with a toothpick. Barbecue over very hot charcoal or cook under a grill for about 2–3 minutes on each side, taking care not to overcook.

Helpful hints: Make palm sugar syrup by simmering ½ tablespoon chopped palm sugar in 2 tablespoons water until liquid is reduced by half.

BUTTER PRAWNS & BLACK PEPPER CRAB

Opposite: Butter Prawns (top left) and Black Pepper Crab (bottom right).

BUTTER PRAWNS

A relatively recent Malaysian creation, this combines traditionally Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western ingredients. ◔◔

600 g (1¼ lb) large prawns
oil for deep frying
2–3 tablespoons butter
15 bird's-eye chillies, roughly chopped
10–15 sprigs curry leaves
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
½ teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons sugar
½ teaspoon light soy sauce
½ teaspoon Chinese wine
½ grated coconut, dry fried until golden

Remove heads from the prawns but leave on shells. Slit down the back to remove intestinal tract, trim feelers and legs and dry prawns thoroughly. Heat the oil and deep fry the prawns. Drain and reserve.

Melt the butter, add chillies, curry leaves, garlic and salt and fry for 2 minutes. Add prawns, sugar, soy sauce, wine and grated coconut. Cook over high heat for 1–2 minutes, stirring frequently. Serve immediately.

Helpful hints: Do not use frozen prawns as the texture after thawing is not suitable for this recipe.

BLACK PEPPER CRAB

This is a real Malaysian dish, starting with mud crabs and Chinese seasonings, adding Indian black pepper and curry leaves, enriching the flavour with butter and then tossing in Malay bird's-eye chillies for a knock-out result. ◔◔

3 fresh mud crabs (about 500 g/1 lb each)
oil for deep frying
2 tablespoons butter
2 shallots, thinly sliced
2 cloves garlic, very finely chopped
1 tablespoon salted soya beans, mashed
2 tablespoons dried prawns, roasted and ground
2 tablespoons black pepper, ground coarsely
½ cup curry leaves
10 red or green bird's-eye chillies, chopped
2 tablespoons black soy sauce
3 tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons oyster sauce

Clean the crabs and cut in half, discarding the spongy "dead man's fingers". Smash the claws with a cleaver to allow the seasonings in. Deep fry the crabs until half cooked, drain and set aside.

Heat a wok, melt butter and put in shallots, garlic, salted soya beans, dried prawns, black pepper, curry leaves and chillies. Sauté until fragrant then add crab and the remaining ingredients. Cook for 5–10 minutes until the crab is done.

INDIAN FISH CURRY

Many Indian fish curries include aubergines and okra, vegetables which seem to have a particular affinity with spices and fish. ⓯⓯

¾ cup oil
½ teaspoon fenugreek seeds
3 pieces of cinnamon stick, each 4 cm (¾ in) long
5 cardamom pods, bruised
7 dried chillies, left wholed
9 shallots, sliced
4 large onions sliced
8 cloves garlic, sliced
2.5 cm (1 in) ginger, sliced
10 tablespoons fish curry powder
1 tablespoon chilli powder
1½ teaspoons turmeric powder
150 g (5 oz) tamarind pulp
6 cups water
2 small aubergines, halved lengthwise then cut in 3 and deep fried
7 small okra (ladies' fingers), stalks and tips discarded
1 large tomato, cut into 6 wedges
2 sprigs curry leaves
oil for frying
6 fillets of fish (250 g/8 oz each), seasoned with salt and turmeric powder
3 tablespoons sugar
3 teaspoons salt

Opposite: *Indian Fish Curry shown here with ghee rice (top left).*

Heat oil in a saucepan, and fry fenugreek, cinnamon and cardamom for 2 minutes. Add dried chillies, shallots, onions, garlic and ginger and fry for about 10 minutes until golden brown and fragrant. Add the curry, chilli and turmeric powders and continue to stir fry for about 3 minutes, until the oil separates from the mixture.

Add 1 cup of the water to the tamarind, squeeze and strain to obtain the juice. Stir into the saucepan and add the remaining water. Bring to the boil and add the deep-fried aubergines, okra, tomato and the curry leaves. Bring to the boil and simmer for 10 minutes.

Heat oil and quickly deep fry the fish until golden. Drain then add to the curry and simmer for 5 minutes. Add sugar and salt and serve immediately.

Helpful hints: The curry sauce and vegetables can be cooked in advance, and the fish fried and set aside. Combine the two and simmer just before serving.

SALTED FISH AND PINEAPPLE CURRY

Salted fish is popular in Malaysia, and not just as a standby for times when fresh fish may be unavailable owing to monsoon storms. This Eurasian curry uses good quality dried fish cut in 1 cm (½ in) thick slices. ◴◴

1 just-ripe pineapple
125 g (4 oz) salted fish, cut in large cubes
¼ cup oil
½ cup water
1½ cups thick coconut milk
salt to taste

Spice Paste:

6 shallots
3 red chillies
2.5 cm (1 in) fresh turmeric
2.5 cm (1 in) galangal
2 lemon grass
½ teaspoon dried shrimp paste
½ teaspoon salt

Peel the pineapple, clean and quarter, remove cores, wash and cut into triangular pieces. Blend half the pineapple with about ¼ cup water to make a pulp and keep aside.

Soak the fish in water for about 10 minutes, then drain and dry well.

Chop spice paste ingredients then blend until fine. Heat the oil in a saucepan, add the blended spice paste and stir fry gently for 5 minutes. Add pineapple cubes and stir fry until well coated with spices. Put in salted fish, the pineapple pulp, water and coconut milk. Reduce heat and simmer gently for about 10–15 minutes until pineapple is tender. Add salt to taste.

Helpful hints: Blending half the pineapple gives a lovely sweet flavour to the curry gravy. You can substitute prawns for the salted fish.

BORNEO FISH & SABAH VEGETABLE

Opposite: Borneo Fish (left) and Sabah Vegetable (right).

BORNEO MARINATED FISH

Spanking fresh fish marinated with lemon juice and spiced up with lashings of ginger, shallots and chillies is a favourite among Sarawak's Melanau people, who call their version Umai, and Sabah's Kadazans, who call it Hinava. ⓓⓓ

500 g (1 lb) very fresh white fish (Spanish mackerel preferred)
⅓ cup freshly squeezed lime or lemon juice
2–3 red chillies
1 teaspoon salt
6–8 shallots, thinly sliced
5 cm (2 in) ginger, very finely shredded
2 sprigs fresh coriander leaves, roughly chopped
2 sprigs Chinese celery, roughly chopped

Remove all skin and bones from the fish and cut it in thin slices. Keep aside 2 tablespoons of lime juice then soak the fish in the remaining juice for at least 30 minutes, stirring once or twice, until the fish turns white. Drain and discard lime juice.

While the fish is marinating, pound the chillies with salt until fine. When fish is ready, mix it with the chillies, shallots, ginger, fresh herbs and reserved lime juice. Taste and add more salt if desired. Serve immediately as part of a rice-based meal.

SABAH VEGETABLE

Cekuk manis (*Sauropus albicans*), a shrub with edible leaves, grows wild throughout Southeast Asia. A vegetable grower in Lahad Datu, Sabah, discovered a method to make it grow quickly so that the stems are edible, earning it the name Sabah vegetable or even Sabah asparagus. Any leafy green vegetable can be cooked in this way. ⓓ

250 g (½ lb) Sabah vegetable or leafy greens
½ teaspoon dried shrimp paste
2 red chillies
2 shallots
1 clove garlic
1 tablespoon oil
salt to taste

Pinch off any tough stems at the the end of the Sabah vegetable and cut in 5 cm (2 in) lengths. Alternatively, wash, dry and coarsely chop leafy greens such as water convolvulus (*kangkung*) or spinach.

Pound or blend shrimp paste, chopped chillies, sliced shallots and garlic until coarse. Heat oil in a wok and fry the pounded mixture for 2–3 minutes, then add vegetables and stir fry quickly until just cooked. Add salt to taste and serve.

PORTUGUESE BAKED FISH

Despite the name, there's nothing Iberian about this well known fish creation from Malacca's Portuguese Settlement, which blends Malay spices and herbs with Chinese soy sauce for a unique taste. 🕘🕘

2 teaspoons chilli powder
¾ cup oil
5 fragrant lime leaves, very finely sliced
1 teaspoon sesame oil
¼ teaspoon soy sauce
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon sugar
banana leaf
aluminium foil
1 whole fish, weighing about 750 g (1½ lb) or 6 white fish fillets

Spice Paste:

3 onions
6 red chillies
1 scant teaspoon dried shrimp paste
1 cm (½ in) galangal
2 lemon grass
5 candlenuts
1 cup water

Chop spice paste ingredients then blend finely with the water. Mix in the chilli powder and lime leaves, then fry gently in the oil for about 5 minutes. Combine with the sesame oil, soy sauce, salt and sugar. Mix well and leave to cool.

Cut a large rectangle of banana leaf and brush with oil. If using a whole fish, remove scales, gills and stomach. Cut down the underneath side of the fish from the tail to head and flatten fish with your hand. Slash down either side of the backbone from head to tail, to release the fish flesh from the bones and allow the spice paste to penetrate. Rub the cooked spice paste all over the fish, pushing it well into the slits. if using fish fillets, coat generously on either side with the paste.

Fold the fish in a package in banana leaf and wrap again in foil to secure it. If using fillets, wrap each individually and fasten with a toothpick. Bake, grill or barbecue until cooked.

Helpful hints: The spice paste can be prepared several hours in advance, and rubbed into the fish just before cooking.

AYAM PERCIK

Spicy Barbecued Chicken

It's not surprising that this beautifully seasoned chicken, barbecued over a charcoal fire, is so popular, sold at roadside food stalls and markets all over the northeastern state of Kelantan. 🕐🕐🕐

5 whole chicken legs
4 tablespoons cooking oil
1 slice *asam gelugor* or 2 teaspoons tamarind pulp
4 lemon grass, bruised
1 cup water
1 cup thick coconut milk
1 1/2 tablespoons sugar
salt to taste

Marinade:

1 teaspoon turmeric powder
1 teaspoon chilli powder
1 tablespoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt

Spice Paste:

3 red chillies
6 cloves garlic
5 shallots
4 candlenuts
2 cm (3/4 in) ginger
9 dried chillies, soaked in hot water

Mix the marinade, combine with the chicken and set aside for 1 hour.

Chop the spice paste ingredients and blend finely. Heat oil in a saucepan and fry the spice paste, tamarind and lemon grass for 5 minutes. Add water and cook another 3 minutes. Put in coconut milk, sugar and salt and simmer over a medium fire for 5 minutes.

Barbecue the chicken over a low charcoal fire or under a grill, basting frequently with the gravy, until the chicken is cooked.

Opposite: *Ayam Percik shown here with Nasi Kerabu. Recipe for Nasi Kerabu is on page 68.*

SPECIAL FRIED RICE & CHICKEN WINGS

SPECIAL FRIED RICE

There must be hundreds of versions of fried rice in Malaysia. This one, from a Nonya kitchen, gets its distinctive flavour from the tiny dried salted fish used by Chinese cooks. Smaller than the usual Malay *ikan bilis*, they are sometimes called silver fish in English. ◔◔

Opposite: *Barbecued Chicken Wings (left) and Special Fried Rice (right).*

4 cups cold cooked rice
½ cup very small dried anchovies
⅓ cup oil
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
150 g (5 oz) chicken breast, diced
150 g (5 oz) peeled prawns
3 eggs, beaten
1 tablespoon light soy sauce
salt and pepper to taste
¼ teaspoon sesame oil
150 g (5 oz) beansprouts
2 spring onions, finely sliced

Break up the rice with a fork and set aside. Heat enough oil to fry the dried anchovies until crisp. Drain and keep aside. Discard oil.

Heat ⅓ cup oil and gently fry the garlic for a few seconds, then add chicken and prawns and stir fry for 3–4 minutes. Raise heat and add egg, stirring until set. Add rice and continue cooking over maximum heat, stirring constantly, until rice is heated through. Add seasonings, beansprouts and spring onions, stir well, add anchovies and stir again. Serve immediately.

Helpful hints: Rice left overnight is preferred for any fried rice dish, as it is drier and firmer and will result in a better texture.

BARBECUED CHICKEN WINGS

Although often overlooked upon in the West, chicken wings are highly regarded in Asia for their slightly gelatinous texture. In Malaysia, you will often find them being barbecued, especially at roadside stalls in the evenings, in a special rack that holds a number of wings at a time. ◔

6 large chicken wings
½ teaspoon Chinese wine
½ teaspoon sesame oil
1 tablespoon light soy sauce
2 tablespoons black soy sauce
2 tablespoons oyster sauce
2 tablespoons honey
salt and pepper to taste

Combine all the ingredients and marinate the chicken wings for 6 hours. Cook over a barbecue pit or under a grill, turning until cooked and golden brown.

DRY MUTTON CURRY & CHICKEN CURRY

DRY MUTTON CURRY

Mutton is popular with both Indians and Malays, who sometimes substitute it with goat. This is a typical Southern Indian curry, with potatoes adding a pleasant soothing flavour and a contrasting texture.

500 g (1 lb) boneless lamb or mutton leg, cubed
5 cups water
4 tablespoons chilli powder
1 teaspoon turmeric powder
4 potatoes, peeled and cubed
½ cup oil
25 shallots, sliced
1 cm (½ in) ginger, sliced
7 cloves garlic, sliced
2 sprigs curry leaves
2 teaspoons salt
2 teaspoons sugar

Bring the lamb, water, chilli and turmeric powder to the boil and simmer for 25 minutes. Add potatoes and continue to cook until they are tender and liquid has reduced by half.

In a separate saucepan, heat oil and fry the shallots, ginger and garlic until golden brown. Drain and add to the lamb with the curry leaves and cook until the sauce thickens. Add salt and sugar to taste.

Opposite: Dry Mutton Curry (top left) and Chicken Curry (bottom right).

CHICKEN CURRY

The use of cinnamon and star anise gives a robust flavour to this Indian chicken curry.

¼ cup ghee
10-15 dried chillies, soaked and ground to a paste
1 cup meat curry powder
5 cinnamon sticks, each about 5 cm (2 in) long
3 star anise
1 handful curry leaves
10 potatoes, peeled and quartered
1 chicken, cut into small pieces
2½ cups coconut milk
salt to taste
1–2 teaspoons sugar

Spice Paste:

15 shallots
4 cloves garlic
2.5 cm (1 in) ginger

Blend the spice paste ingredients until fine. Melt the ghee in a large pot, saute the blended items, then add chilli paste and curry powder, mixed with a little water to make a paste. Continue frying until fragrant, then add cinnamon, star anise, curry leaves and potato. Put in chicken and saute until the chicken is half cooked. Add coconut milk, season with salt and sugar.

DEVIL CHICKEN CURRY

The large amount of chillies make the fiery name entirely appropriate for this Eurasian curry, which is similar to Indian Vindaloo with its blending of spices and vinegar. The Malaysian touch is given with fresh lemon grass, galangal and dried shrimp paste. ❷❷

1/4 cup oil
2 onions, quartered
5 cm (2 in) ginger, shredded
5 cloves garlic, sliced
2 red chillies, halved lengthwise
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon light soy sauce
4 tablespons sugar
4 potatoes, peeled and quartered
1/2 chicken, cut into serving pieces
1/2 cup distilled white vinegar
3–4 cups water

Spice Paste:

30 shallots
30 dried chillies, soaked and de-seeded
3 cm (1 1/4 in) fresh turmeric
2.5 cm (1 in) galangal
2 lemon grass
1 teaspoon brown mustard seed, soaked in water 5 minutes

Chop spice paste ingredients and blend with a little of the oil until fine. Set aside.

Heat remaining oil and fry the onions, ginger, garlic and chillies for 2 minutes. Drain off the oil and set mixture aside.

Fry the blended ingredients with 4 tablespoons oil for 10 minutes, adding the salt and soy sauce. Add sugar, stir well, then put in the potatoes, chicken, vinegar and water. Simmer uncovered until chicken is cooked. Taste and adjust seasonings, adding a little more vinegar for a sourer taste if liked. Add the reserved fried ingredients, stir well and serve with rice.

Helpful hints: Cut the chillies into pieces before soaking, and discard the seeds—which will fall to the bottom of the bowl—to help reduce the heat.

NASI AYAM

Chicken Rice

Chicken served with rice, chilli sauce and cucumber is one of the most popular coffee shop and hawker dishes in Malaysia. The Chinese version normally uses chicken simmered in stock, while this Malay recipe uses roast chicken. ✪✪✪

Roast Chicken:

½ fresh chicken
3 cloves garlic
4 shallots
5 cm (2 in) ginger
3 tablespoons oyster sauce
1 tablespoon black soy sauce
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
1 tablespoon tomato sauce
1 tablespoon chilli sauce
1 teaspoon chilli powder
1 teaspoon salt

Rice:

2 cups rice, washed thoroughly
2.5 cm (1 in) ginger
3 cloves garlic
4 tablespoons butter
2 *pandan* leaves
pinch salt
3 tablespoons fried shallots

Chilli Sauce:

5 red chillies
4 cloves garlic
2.5 cm (1 in) ginger
3 tablespoons lime juice
1 teaspoon sesame oil
salt and sugar to taste

Garnish:

1 cucumber, sliced

Prepare the **chicken** well in advance. Prick the chicken with a fork to allow seasonings to penetrate. Blend or pound garlic, shallots and ginger then mix with all other ingredients and rub into chicken. Marinate 4 hours or overnight if possible. Roast chicken in a hot oven for about 20 minutes. Cut into serving pieces and put on a platter garnished with sliced cucumber.

Wash the **rice**, drain and put in a saucepan or rice cooker. Pound the ginger and garlic together and add to rice together with butter, *pandan* leaves, salt and sufficient water to cook the rice. When the rice is cooked, fluff up with a fork, put in a serving bowl and decorate with fried shallots.

Blend all the **chilli sauce** ingredients together until fine.

Serve the rice with the chicken, cucumber and chilli sauce, with a bowl of clear chicken soup to accompany it if liked.

Opposite: *Nasi Ayam shown here with (clockwise) chilli sauce, ginger and dark soya sauce.*

AYAM LIMAU PURUT & SAYUR LEMAK

Chicken with Lime Leaf & Vegetables in Coconut Milk

AYAM LIMAU PURUT

The charm of this Nonya curry comes from its aromatic fresh herbs and seasonings. 🕐🕐

½ cup oil
½ chicken, cut in serving pieces
½ cup water
1 slice *asam gelugor* or lime juice to taste
1 cup thick coconut milk
4 fragrant lime leaves
salt to taste

Spice Paste:

2 medium red or brown onions
8 red chillies
3 cloves garlic
1 lemon grass
3 cm (1¼ in) galangal
1 teaspoon turmeric powder

Chop and blend the spice paste ingredients, adding a little of the oil if necessary to keep the blades turning. Heat oil and fry the blended ingredients for about 5 minutes, until fragrant.

Add the chicken, *asam gelugor* and water and simmer until the chicken is half cooked. Add the coconut milk and lime leaves and simmer uncovered until the chicken is tender. Add salt and, if using, lime juice to taste.

Opposite: Ayam Limau Purut (left) and Sayur Lemak (right).

SAYUR LEMAK

A Nonya adaptation of Malay-style vegetables simmered in seasoned coconut milk. 🕐🕐

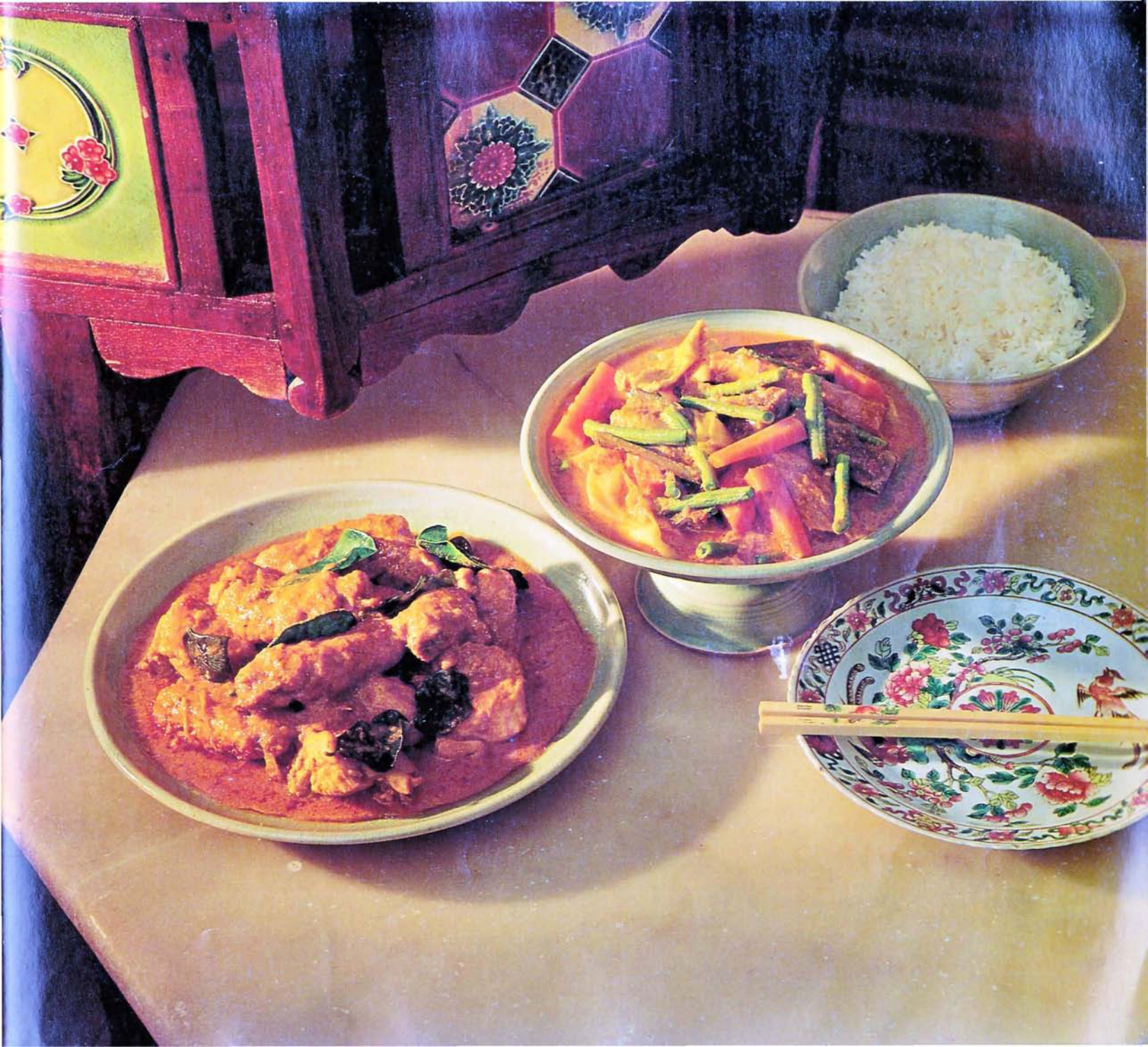
3 tablespoons oil
1½ cups water
1½ cups thick coconut milk
1 carrot, cut in 4 cm (1½ in) matchsticks
1 small aubergine, cut in 4 cm (1½ in) matchsticks
3 long beans, cut in 4 cm (1½ in) lengths
¼ cabbage, coarsely shredded
1 hard beancurd, deep fried and quartered
salt to taste

Spice paste:

2 red chillies
3 candlenuts
5 shallots
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
½ teaspoon dried shrimp paste
1 teaspoons dried prawns, soaked 5 minutes in warm water

Chop the spice paste ingredients and blend finely, adding a little oil if necessary to keep the blades turning. Heat the oil and fry the blended ingredients for 5 minutes, then add the water and coconut milk and bring slowly to the boil.

Add the prepared vegetables, beancurd and salt and simmer uncovered until the vegetables are just cooked.



RENDANG DAGING

Rich Coconut Beef

No festive occasion is complete without this rich Malay dish where beef is cooked to melting tenderness in a fragrant, coconut gravy. ❶❶❶

½ cup oil
3 cm (1¼ in) cinnamon stick
2 cloves
4 star anise
2 cardamom pods
500 g (1 lb) topside beef, cubed
1 cup thick coconut milk
1 slice *asam gelugor*, or 2 teaspoons dried tamarind pulp soaked in warm water for juice
2 fragrant lime leaves, very finely sliced
1 turmeric leaf, very finely sliced
2 tablespoons *kerisik* (*see below*)
1½ teaspoons sugar
salt to taste

***Spice Paste*:**

2 shallots
2 cm (¾ in) galangal
3 lemon grass
2 cloves garlic
2 cm (¾ in) ginger
10 dried chillies, soaked in hot water

Chop the spice paste ingredients then puree in a blender until fine. Heat the oil, add the spice paste, cinnamon, cloves, star anise and cardamom and fry for 5 minutes.

Add the beef, coconut milk and *asam gelugor* or tamarind juice. Simmer uncovered, stirring frequently, until the meat is almost cooked. Add the lime and turmeric leaves, *kerisik*, sugar and salt. Lower the heat and simmer until the meat is really tender and the gravy has dried up. Approximate cooking time 1 to 1½ hours.

Helpful hints: To prepare the *kerisik*, roast 300 g (10 oz) grated fresh coconut in a slow oven until brown. Alternatively, cook in a dry wok, stirring constantly. Let the coconut cool, then grind finely until the oil comes out.

LAMB RIBS WITH BLACK PEPPER

Lashings of freshly ground black pepper combined with other pungent Indian spices plus Chinese soy and oyster sauce make this Eurasian dish a real winner. ❹❹

3 tablespoons oil
4 cloves garlic, chopped
6 level tablespoons freshly ground black pepper
6 tablespoons black soy sauce
3 tablespoons oyster sauce
1 kg (2 lb) lamb ribs or cutlets
6 cardamom pods, bruised
6 cloves
10 cm (4 in) cinnamon stick
2 cups water
2–3 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
3 onions, sliced
1½ cups frozen green peas, defrosted

Heat oil in saucepan. Add garlic, pepper, soy and oyster sauce and saute for 1 minute over medium heat. Add the ribs, cardamom, cloves and cinnamon and 1 cup of water. Cook uncovered over gentle heat, stirring from time to time, until tender. If the meat threatens to dry up, add more of the remaining cup of water, a little at a time, during cooking.

When the meat is tender, add sugar, salt, onions and green peas. Stir to mix well and serve immediately.

Helpful hints: Be sure not to use high heat during cooking or the spices will burn and make the flavour bitter.

BEANSPROUT KERABU & SERUNDING

BEANSPROUT KERABU

This salad from the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia an excellent accompaniment to rich or spicy dishes. ◐◐

4 tablespoons freshly grated coconut
500 g (1 lb) beansprouts
4 tablespoons oil
salt to taste

Spice Paste:

8 red chillies
6 shallots
2 tablespoons dried prawns, washed and drained
3 cloves garlic

Opposite: Beansprout Kerabu (left) and Coconut Serunding (right).

Fry the coconut over low heat in a wok, stirring constantly, until golden brown. Set aside to cool.

Blanch the beansprouts in boiling water for just a few seconds, drain, plunge into cold water and drain again then set aside.

Chop and puree the spice paste ingredients finely. Heat oil in a pan and fry the blended ingredients for 10 minutes, adding a little water if the mixture becomes dry. Season and add the roasted coconut. Fry until the mixture is dried. Allow to cool.

Combine with the beansprouts and serve.

COCONUT SERUNDING

This is traditionally served with Nasi Kerabu. ◐◐

1 fresh coconut, grated
8 tablespoons oil
1 tablespoon fennel powder
2 slices *asam gelugor* or 1teaspoon lime juice
salt to taste
1 teaspoon sugar
1 turmeric leaf, sliced
4 fragrant lime leaves, sliced

Spice Paste:

15 dried chillies, soaked in hot water
2 lemon grass
2 cm ($^3/_4$ in) galangal
1 cm ($^1/_2$ in) turmeric
3 shallots
3 cloves garlic

Chop and blend the spice paste ingredients. Roast the grated coconut in the oven until light golden. Heat the oil and fry spice paste together with the fennel powder and *asam gelugor* slices for 5 minutes. Add the salt, sugar, lime juice (if using) and roasted coconut. Fry over low heat until the coconut is crisp and dry. Add the turmeric and fragrant lime leaves and cook for another 3 minutes. Leave to cool before serving.

NEW YEAR SALAD & STIR-FRIED PEAS

NEW YEAR SALAD

A firm family favourite during the New Year's Eve reunion dinner, when many other rich dishes are served.

1 large yam bean (*bengkuang*)
1 medium sized carrot
1 dried squid, about 10 cm (4 in) long
2 tablespoons oil
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
5 medium-sized prawns, peeled and diced
1/3 cup chicken stock
white pepper
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
long leafed lettuce
***hoisin* sauce (optional)**

Opposite: Stir-fried Peas (left) and New Year Salad (right).

Peel the yam bean and carrot and cut both into matchstick pieces. Shred dried squid finely (or buy it already shredded) and soak with boiling water to cover for about 10 minutes. Drain well.

Heat oil in a wok and stir fry the garlic for a few seconds. Add the prawns and cook until they change colour, then add the squid. Mix thoroughly then add the yam bean and carrot and cook until the yam bean starts to soften. Add chicken stock and simmer, turning from time to time, until the vegetables are soft. Add soy sauce, mix well and serve at room temperature together with a plate of lettuce leaves. Each dinner puts some of the vegetable inside a leaf and rolls it up to eat, adding a smear of *hoisin* sauce if liked.

STIR-FRIED PEAS

Tender sugar snap peas contrast beautifully in colour and texture with the white garlic and pink prawns.

250 g (1/2 lb) sugar snap peas
1/2 teaspoon Chinese rice wine
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
1 1/2 tablespoons oyster sauce
1 tablespoon oil
8 cloves garlic, skins left on and lightly bruised
1/2 cup water or fresh chicken stock
1 heaped teaspoon cornflour, blended in a little water
100 g (3 1/2 oz) peeled prawns
1/2 teaspoon salt

Blanch the peas in boiling water for no more than 5 seconds then drain thoroughly. Mix rice wine, soy sauce and oyster sauce and set aside.

Heat oil until very hot and stir fry garlic for a few seconds, then add the prawns and fry until they change colour. Add the peas and mixed seasonings and stir fry for about half a minute, then add water and bring to the boil. Thicken with cornflour, add salt and serve.

SNAKE GOURD & SPICY PUMPKIN

SNAKE GOURD

Colours and textures contrast beautifully in this southern Indian dish.

1 cup yellow lentils
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
2 cups water
1 snake gourd
4 shallots, sliced
1 clove garlic, sliced
2 tablespoons oil
1 tablespoon brown mustard seed
1 teaspoon salt
1 sprig curry leaves
2 red chillies, seeds removed, sliced

Opposite: Snake Gourd (left) and Spicy Pumpkin (right).

Wash lentils thoroughly, combine with turmeric and water and simmer until soft.

While the lentils are cooking, prepare the gourd. For a more decorative appearance, scrape the skin deeply lengthwise with a fork and cut in half lengthwise. Remove the pulpy centre and cut across in 0.5 cm (½ in) slices. Alternative, peel the gourd, remove the centre and cut in circles 0.5 cm (½ in) thick.

Fry the shallots and garlic in oil until soft, then add mustard seeds and cook until they begin to pop. Add cooked lentils, gourd and salt, and cook until tender. Just before removing from heat, add curry leaf and chilli. Toss and serve.

Helpful hints: If snake gourd is not available, substitute 500 g (1 lb) of long beans, or slices of any type of marrow or summer squash.

SPICY PUMPKIN

Gourds are very popular among Malaysians of Southern Indian origin, especially sweet-tasting pumpkin which goes well with spices.

750 g (1½ lb) pumpkin, peeled and cut in 2.5 cm (1 in) pieces
3 tablespoons oil
1 large onion, finely chopped
1 tablespoon brown mustard seed
2 sprigs curry leaves
1 tablespoon fish or chicken curry powder
2–3 teaspoons chilli powder
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
2 cups water
1 teaspoon salt
sugar to taste

Prepare the pumpkin and set aside. Heat the oil and fry the onion until golden, then add mustard seed and curry leaves and fry until mustard seeds pop. Add the spice powders and fry for 30 seconds, then put in pumpkin and stir for a minute or two, until well coated with spices. Slowly add the water, stirring, then add salt and simmer uncovered until tender and dry.

PISANG JANTUNG

Banana Bud Salad

BANANA BUD SALAD

No Malaysian with bananas growing in the garden would waste the bud of the banana flower, which is also sold in local markets. It tastes surprisingly similar to artichokes. This version of the popular banana bud salad comes from the Portuguese community in Malacca. 🕐🕐

1 banana bud
100 g (3½ oz) prawns, steamed and peeled
2 tablespoons oil
2 teaspoons finely pounded dried prawns
⅓ cup thick coconut milk
½ teaspoon salt
5 cm (2 in) piece of cucumber, shredded in matchsticks
6 small sour carambola (*belimbing*), very finely sliced lengthwise
1 fresh red chilli, finely sliced
4 shallots, sliced
2 small limes, halved

Spice Paste:

3 fresh red chillies
2 cloves garlic
6 shallots
1 teaspoon dried shrimp paste

Remove the outer red leaves of the banana bud and simmer the heart in lightly salted water for 20 minutes. Drain, cool, then discard away any hard portion of the boiled banana bud. Cut in half lengthwise then cut crosswise in coarse slices. Set aside with the cooked prawns.

Chop the spice paste ingredients and blend with ½ cup water. Fry dried prawns gently in oil over moderate heat for half a minute, then add the blended ingredients and cook for about 2–3 minutes, until fragrant. Add coconut milk and salt and leave to cool.

To serve, put banana bud in the centre of a plate, add cucumber, carambola, chilli and shallots. Top with prawns and pour over the cooled sauce.

Helpful hints: If banana bud is not available, substitute with 250 g (8 oz) cooked shredded chicken breast.

MULIU

Aubergine and Prawn Curry

This mild, fragrant dish from Malacca's Portuguese Settlement is traditionally offered by the bridegroom's family for all his relatives the night before the wedding, when only fish and vegetable dishes may be served. ◐◐

6 small thin aubergines, about 15–20 cm (6–8 in) long
1 cup oil
1 tablespoon powdered fennel
2 teaspoons powdered cumin
3 teaspoons powdered black pepper
1 teaspoon salt
300 g (10 oz) prawns, peeled but tail left on
1 cup toasted grated coconut, blended until slightly oily
1 1/4 cups thick coconut milk
1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar
4 cloves garlic, finely sliced and fried for garnish

Spice Paste:

6 red chillies
18 shallots
3 cm (1 1/2 in) fresh turmeric
4 stalks lemon grass
6 candlenuts
1 1/2 teaspoons dried shrimp paste
1 cup water

Slice off 1 cm (1/2 in) of end of each aubergine, but leave on stem. Cut a cross lengthwise to about halfway down each aubergine and soak in water while preparing other ingredients.

Chop the spice paste ingredients then blend with water until fine. Mix in the powdered fennel, cumin and pepper and set aside.

Drain and dry the aubergines. Heat enough oil to deep fry the aubergines and cook for about 5 minutes. Drain and set aside. Tip out all but 1/4 cup of oil and gently fry the spice mixture and salt for about 5 minutes. Add the prawns and pounded coconut and stir fry until the prawns change colour. Add the coconut milk a little at a time, then add vinegar. Simmer a minute or two then return aubergine to the pan and simmer gently uncovered for 5 minutes.

Helpful hints: The aubergines and sauce can be prepared in advance, then combined and cooked for 5 minutes just before serving. If liked, extra chillies can be added to the spice paste for a more fiery taste.

PENGAT PISANG & PISANG GORENG

Bananas in Coconut Milk & Fried Bananas

PENGAT PISANG

Coconuts, fragrant palm sugar and easily available fruits and tubers such as bananas, jackfruit, *cempedak*, young coconut flesh, tapioca, sweet potato and yam are combined to make various types of Pengat. This version has a particularly pleasing, velvety texture as a result of the sago. ❶

10 ripe finger bananas (*pisang emas*)
2 tablespoons pearl sago
1 litre (4 cups) water
4 *pandan* leaves
1 cup thick coconut milk
100 g (3½ oz) palm sugar, boiled with ¾ cup water to obtain syrup
a pinch of salt

Opposite: Pengat Pisang (left) and Pisang Goreng (right).

Peel bananas and halve crosswise. Wash sago and drain.

Bring the water to the boil with screwpine leaf, then add the sago, stirring constantly. Simmer until the sago balls turn transparent, then add the bananas, thick coconut milk, palm sugar syrup and salt according to taste.

Bring back to the boil and immediately remove from heat. Serve at room temperature.

PISANG GORENG

A popular snack sold at food stalls all over the country. Sweet potato or yam can be used instead of bananas if preferred. ❶❶

10 large firm bananas
200 g (7½ oz) rice flour
½ teaspon salt
1 eggwhite, beaten
½ teaspoon slaked lime (*kapor*)
½ cup water
oil for deep frying

Peel the bananas and halve lengthwise. Mix rice flour, salt, egg, slaked lime and water. Stir until the batter is smooth, adding more water if necessary to get the consistency of a thick cream. Sieve then fold in the beaten egg white.

Heat oil in wok. Coat pieces of banana in batter and fry, turning frequently until golden brown and cooked. Adjust the heat so that banana does not burn. Remove, drain on paper towel.

Helpful hints: The slaked lime is added to ensure a crisp texture to the batter, but can be omitted if not available.

SAGO HONEYDEW & GULA MELAKA

SAGO WITH HONEYDEW

Chinese desserts are not commonly served in the home, although elaborate restaurant meals often finish with a refreshing dessert such as this. ◔◔

¾ cup pearl sago
7 cups water
1 cup coconut milk
1 cup sugar
½ cup water
½ honeydew melon

Opposite: Sago Honeydew (left) and Gula Melaka (right)

Soak sago with 2 cups water for 30 minutes then drain. Bring the remaining 5 cups water to the boil and add sago. Cook until transparent. Drain in a sieve and wash under cold running water. Leave aside until cool.

Boil together sugar and ½ cup water together to make a syrup and allow to cool.

Peel the honeydew, cut in half and discard seeds. Blend half the honeydew to make juice and cut the other half into small cubes, or make small balls with a melon baller. Mix the sago, coconut milk, honeydew juice, honeydew cubes and sugar syrup to taste. Serve chilled.

GULA MELAKA

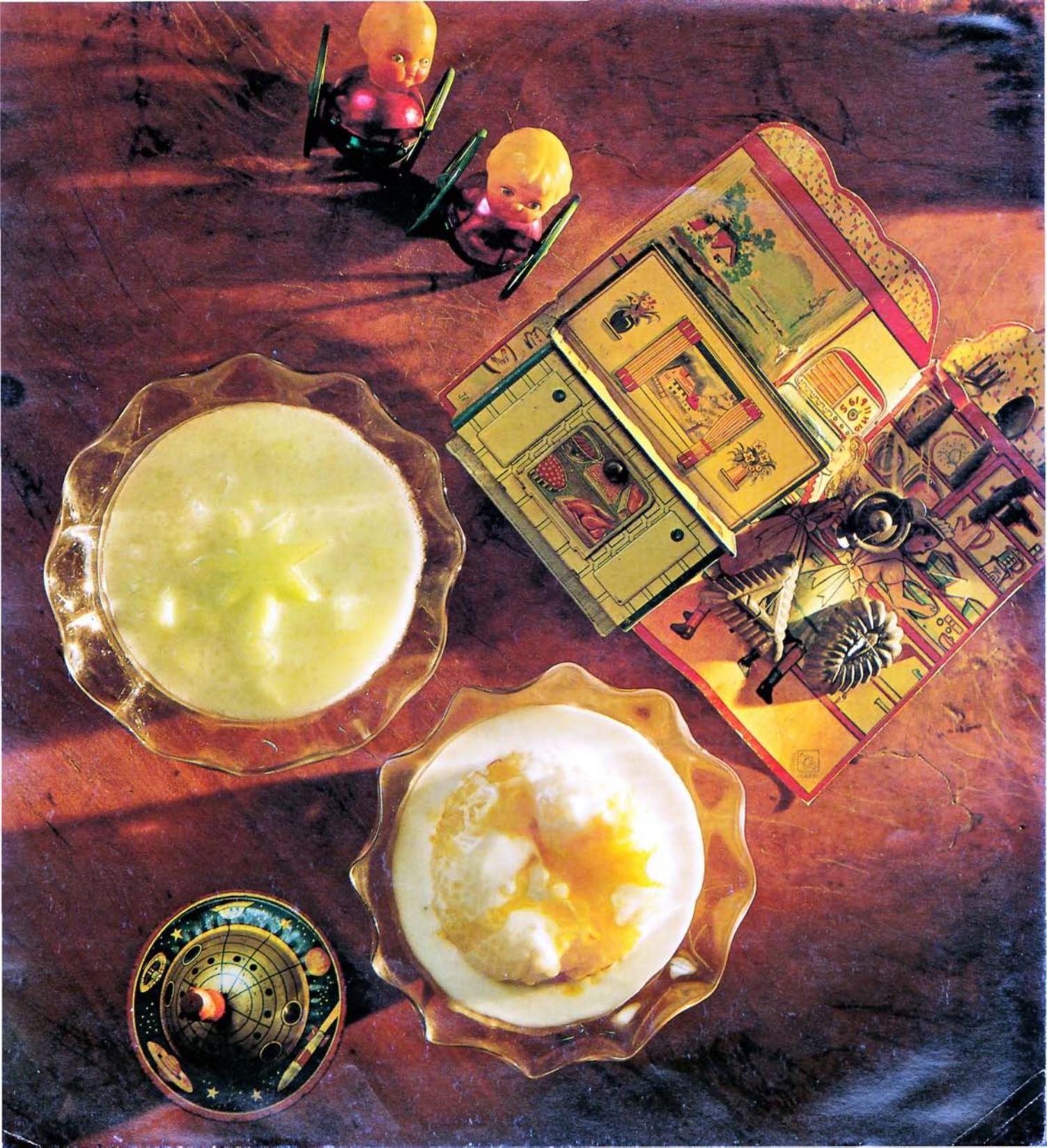
Smooth sago with creamy coconut milk and golden-brown palm sugar syrup make this one of Malaysia's best-loved desserts. The name literally means "Malacca Sugar", although palm sugar (also known as *gula merah* or "red sugar") is made throughout the country. ◔◔

3 litres (12 cups) water
3 *pandan* leaves
300 g (10 oz) pearl sago
1 cup thick coconut milk
100 g (3½ oz) palm sugar, boiled with ¾ cup water to make syrup

Bring the water to boil with the *pandan* leaves. Meanwhile, wash the sago in a sieve, soak in cold water to cover for 3 minutes and drain. When water is boiling, add the sago and simmer for about 15 minutes until it becomes transparent.

Pour the sago into a sieve and wash under cold running water. Place sago into small moulds and refrigerate until set.

To serve, unmould the sago in individual serving dishes. Serve with coconut milk and palm sugar syrup.



AIS KACANG

Shaved Ice with Red Beans

A delicious way to beat the heat, Ais (Ice) Kacang is a mound of shaved ice piled onto a mixture of jellies, red beans and sweet corn. Add a dollop of brightly coloured syrup and a generous splash of evaporated milk and it's a treat that not only the children will enjoy. The following amounts are for each individual serving. 🕐🕐

1 heaped tablespoon red (*azuki*) beans, boiled until soft
1 heaped tablespoon sweet corn kernels
1 heaped tablespoon finely diced jelly
1 heaped tablespoon *cendol* (optional)
1 tablespoon chopped peanuts
1 teaspoon chopped preserved nutmeg fruit (optional)
large bowl of shaved ice
1 tablespoon palm sugar syrup
1 tablespoon red cordial or coloured sugar syrup cooked with a *pandan* leaf
2 tablespoons evaporated milk

Measure the beans, corn, jelly, *cendol*, peanuts and nutmeg fruit into a bowl. Top with a cone of shaved ice, then pour over the palm sugar syrup, cordial and milk. Serve immediately.

Helpful hints: Ice must be very finely shaved for this dish; try processing it in a food processor or blender.

PYE
ELVIS
YOU + FAME AND FORTUNE

NONYA PANCAKE

A Nonya version of the Malay stuffed pancake, Kuih Dadar, is served with a coconut sauce as a teatime treat or snack, rather than a dessert, in Malaysia. ④④④

Batter:

10 *pandan* leaves
1 cup water
150 g (5 oz) plain flour
1 egg
scant $\frac{1}{3}$ cup fresh milk
$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons melted butter

Filling:

2 cups grated coconut
1$\frac{1}{2}$ cups water
3 *pandan* leaves
$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
150 g (5 oz) palm sugar, chopped

Coconut Sauce:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup thick coconut milk
$\frac{1}{2}$ cup water
3 *pandan* leaves
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon cornflour
pinch of salt

Prepare the **batter** by blending the *pandan* leaves with water and straining to obtain the juice. Sift the flour into a bowl and add egg, milk, salt and *pandan* juice. Stir until smooth, adding more water if necessary to obtain a thin consistency. Set aside while preparing the filling and sauce.

Combine all **filling** ingredients in a saucepan and simmer over very low heat, stirring occasionally, for about 45 minutes, until thick and dry. Set aside to cool.

Combine all the **coconut sauce** ingredients in a saucepan and stir continuously over low heat until the sauce thickens and clears. Sieve and serve warm or at room temperature.

Cook the pancakes. Grease a non-stick pan with a little butter and pour in enough batter to make a pancake about 15–20 cm (6–8 in) in diameter. Cook gently on both sides and reserve. Repeat until all the batter is used.

To serve, put 2–3 tablespoonsful of the filling in the centre of a pancake. Tuck in the edges and roll up cigar fashion. Serve the pancakes, preferably still warm or at room temperature, with the coconut sauce.

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The remarkable diversity of Malaysia and its exciting cuisines are brought to life in this unique collection of 68 lavishly illustrated recipes. Much more than a cookbook, *The Food of Malaysia* provides an in-depth look at the ethnic origins and cross-cultural influences that have produced exotic dishes like Salted Fish and Pineapple Curry, Black Pepper Crab, Mutton Soup, Aubergine with Basil, Raw Fish Salad and Portuguese Baked Fish. Stunning photos and detailed information on ingredients and cooking techniques make *The Food of Malaysia* an ideal introduction to the food and culinary lore of the Crossroads of Asia.

WENDY HUTTON, author of the Introduction and editor of the collection, is a writer and editor with a particular interest in the cuisines of Southeast Asia.

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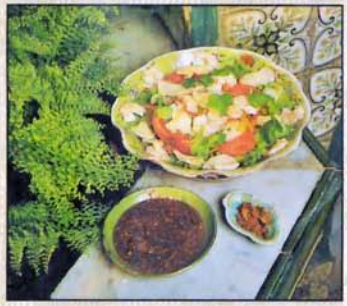

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